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*Jacques Jouet*

# Metro Poems

*Translated from the French by Ian Monk*

What is a metro poem?

From time to time, I write metro poems. This poem being an example.

Do you want to know what a metro poem consists of? Let's suppose  
you do. Here, then, is what a metro poem consists of.

A metro poem is a poem composed during a journey in the metro.

There are as many lines in a metro poem as there are stations in your  
journey, minus one.

The first line is composed mentally between the first two stations of  
your journey (counting the station you got on at).

It is then written down when the train stops at the second station.

The second line is composed mentally between the second and the  
third stations of your journey.

It is then written down when the train stops at the third station.

And so on.

You must not write anything down when the train is moving.

You must not compose when the train has stopped.

The poem's last line is written down on the platform of the last station.

If your journey necessitates one or more changes of line, the poem will  
then have two or more stanzas.

An unscheduled stop between two stations is always an awkward  
moment in the writing of a metro poem.

I'm received ...

I

I'm received by people talking and wheels screeching.

Getting on to the metro for a metro poem and getting on to the metro for  
another reason are two different things.

In the former case my conviction and my project mean that I must be  
ready for anything,

accept whatever happens

to happen upon the rungs of my ladder

in almost equal terms – it's all in the almost.

When taken differently, the metro emphasizes the station you got on at  
and where you'll get off, plus any changes.

A mosquito flies beneath my nose, I don't think I'm much of a frog.

Was it born last night, in the metro's mildness? If I don't think I'm much  
of a frog,

it's because I heard on the radio this morning how effective a natural  
insecticide a frog is.

Whatever happens happens *to constitute* the rungs on my ladder,  
what's more, only trivial events happen, far be it from me to ask  
for more.

What else can happen to a mole except worries about its tunnel, food  
and mating?

No mosquitos, that much is sure! I've just killed the mosquito by  
swatting it against the sleeve of my jacket.

I can affirm that the elementary order of whatever happens  
makes the tortuous crossing of the carriage by an earthworm  
unthinkable.

Unexpectedly, the driver's feminine voice asks me to get off at  
MAISONS-ALFORT-LES JUILLIOTTES,

which means that the change takes place along a straight line.

I often used to take this line, to go to work at Bonneuil,  
invited by Claire Colombier who, coincidentally, has also asked me to  
read in public this evening.

This ‘this evening’ is a strange ‘this evening’, because it has been written  
on a Saturday and refers to the day after tomorrow,  
it’s a way to raise the moment of transmission over the moment of  
production

and, so realizing, I stick by it.

Bursting into the light of the station, the train  
(especially if I’m sitting at the front, as I now am) doesn’t always seem  
inclined to stop.

In the same way, when it emerges into daylight to cross the Marne,  
it apparently accelerates.

I reckon the metro passes over a river five times in Paris and in its  
suburbs,  
one Marne and four Seines, I check  
on the map in my diary, with a question mark over line 10 between  
AUTEUIL and JAVEL,  
which I’ll see about later. The metro is a territory  
with luminous darkness and river landscapes,  
with ladies reading,  
those two hands that cross and which do not belong to the same body,  
those four lips, originating from two bodies, which kiss,  
that false reflected eye contact.

Shall I get off? No, I won’t. But if I don’t,  
I’ll have to keep on writing as far as CHEMIN VERT  
and beyond. This trip has not been recommended by *Holidays*  
*in France*,  
but it’s mine, and from it I bring back  
one souvenir for me and one for our tongue.

2

I’m heading for a quatrain and I’m sure I’ll have one by the time  
I arrive.

Four stations to CHARONNE, which was full of flowers last week,  
a dismal anniversary of a Republic that slices off arms,  
its very own arms, which it also manages to fling far away or press  
against the bars of its own prisons.

3

This morning, I also have the luxury of being sheltered from the rain,  
and surrounded by damp-haired contemporaries,  
with fresh and bristly morning faces, it's Sunday,  
a high proportion of caps, of umbrellas, and of caps *and* umbrellas.  
A man and a woman say goodbye, she gets off, he stays on, they kiss  
each other's cheeks listlessly.

Let's see ... how many of these passengers are aware that we'll arrive at  
LA RAPÉE in daylight,  
given that we're about to cross the Seine while describing a beautiful arc?

Then back at once, crossing to the opposite platform at 12.28.

The bridge is coming on,  
in its construction, already crossing the Seine. I shall soon have seen  
a bridge

being built, being started and being finished.

I never tire of the bend after LA RAPÉE, or before it,  
depending on whether you're heading for PICASSO or ITALIE.  
But the station I get off at is bleak.

4

I'm received by a packed train  
then, in the next line, I'm the one receiving a red accordion,  
which incites me to search in vain for a line that swings and waltzes  
and doesn't grow sad  
because of this polyphonic invasion of remembered embraces long  
since abandoned.

He played in this train for under three francs, I think.  
He couldn't, just couldn't, stay quietly at home,  
as Wilhelm Meister's battling puppets, after the combat, in the  
same drawer  
sleep peacefully hand in hand,  
in a way that's quite incomprehensible to anyone who's followed  
the plot intently.

The scene presented to the audience takes place on a slice of the  
world's mat.

And it's said that this mat can depict a garden which winter prevents us  
from enjoying,

a winter making the garden glum and defensive.

The microcosm is, for instance, the sum of a familiar fragrance  
and unknown odours which, to come back full circle, I'll term  
accordionic.

5

I'm not going anywhere except along the blue line on my notepad,  
forget to write down where I've come from,  
give up giving up writing.

I know that, even on the world's loveliest beach, I could still miss  
taking the metro

and that the passers-by who are a herd of people, me included, are  
as useful to me  
as I am useless to them, writing  
lines on paper which look as if they've been mined from underground,  
extracted from the lodes of a vein, becoming a removable chunk.

This metro poem will be read out this evening at Mercœur  
and, this time, *this evening* really is this evening.

At the heart of mother

is the metro, given that the metro-pole of metropolitan is the  
*meter-polis*, or mother-town,  
if my dictionary is to be believed,  
on the cover of which is a heart, an organ,  
that pumps on and on and, accordingly, sometimes wears itself out.

This metro poem is the fifth and last in a short series.

I wonder how the former, I wonder how the latter, I wonder how they  
both will be received.

## Measure

1

Given that metrology, from the Greek *metron*, is the science of measure,  
it is in the natural order of terms that the metro should be the  
measure of my poem,  
that it should make the thickness of its slices fit my appetite  
and weigh in its cool scales the leaves of lasagne and mille-feuille,  
I'll provide the sauce.  
The weight that the people around me, and I, lose or put on  
per second  
would be gauged and displayed on electronic scales with four  
decimal places  
like the one at Porte de la Villette in *The Measurable and*  
*Unmeasurable* exhibition,  
busily weighing a turnip as it shrivels.  
Here, it is my voice that gauges the poem as it's being spoken,  
along the grid of lines printed on the page, taking up its exact duration.

2

The dream of unmeasurability which lingers potently  
in the nocturnal corridors of the dreams we *grant ourselves*, and yet ...  
is a type of extravagance reminiscent of a customer at the  
fishmonger's giving his own fishy eye teeth for a plaice  
and not a place to stand up in;  
to abandon stability via the poem then find it still intact,  
in the same stride, the same turn of the wheels,  
the count that allows for the appreciation of motion.  
The orthogonal meeting of horizontal lines and vertical rhymes on  
their edges  
inspires me to contradict, one day or another, mere dredges  
affecting these poems which whiteness wedges  
in an extremely unequal fashion against the doubly straight margins  
of the paper.

3

Measure slices from the whole beast  
acceptable portions. Poetry works with what is acceptable.  
It counts its ribs, ribbing one sort of ‘spare rib’ and dribbling over  
another, or both,  
a finger slipping between a pair of other fingers as hands clutch.  
Measure picks what it wants from a conglomerate.  
Here is where the actions of picking and choosing can best be seen,  
the thorough thinking-out of language and its constituent parts.  
I pack my bags.  
As attentively as possible, I ponder the subsequent fate of my  
purchases.  
Everything, however plump, will pass through La Fontaine’s weasel’s  
hole.

4

Between ROBESPIERRE and PORTE DE MONTREUIL, the coat  
of *Don Giovanni*’s Commandatore  
presses down on the shoulders of the person  
who the station I got on at was named after, already a stone statue in  
his genes,  
and onomastic dress.  
For ages, sculptors were skilled at cutting the softest folds of cloth  
from marble  
and ‘silence’ is borne by the word I pronounce.  
It takes wing. To pass over the fact  
that it–switch–es–on–and–off–one–syll–a–ble–per–sec–ond  
would not be doing the unpaid audience a good turn  
as they exercise their orbital attention.

5

I must work on combining my measures  
and write in iambic pentameters.  
The lines would be less long, of equal length.  
But what worries me now is all I have  
is this statement of the impossible.

Which isn't the best of my metro verse.

6

I've set off on an extremely short journey, during which nothing may trigger.  
Wait for it... already there... I must admit that nothing did, and that  
I'm already at RÉPUBLIQUE.

7

Remember where the tunnel leads.  
It leads towards the light. A child is sleeping in the crook of its  
mother's three sides,  
thighs, breast and the strap of her arms sealed by her bejewelled  
hands.  
This is a true oil painting. The woman is Indian, a painted almond,  
red and gold, a burning bush, a flame rising up her forehead from the  
base of her nose,  
her hair blackest black. A female accordionist has got on to play  
*Frère Jacques* ...  
But the brother's already asleep, and his name can't be Jacques.  
I'd willing go as far as the place where he's dreaming to read him  
*The Charge of the Light Brigade* or *Le Cimetière d'Eylau*,  
or else give him a battle comparable to the ones in *Ramayana*.  
But he got off at CAMPO-FORMIO.

I know where it leads. No surprises.  
It always leads along streets, under streets, above streets, towards a  
home,  
which we inhabit, our habitual habitat, of thought.

Art is public, and always as private as it is public.  
 I'm not sure if my neighbour knows that,  
 but what I am sure of, is that he doesn't know that he's a character in  
 a poem.  
 As for the others, who knows, they might have their suspicions when  
 they see me  
 looking up and down from their faces to my page,  
 with an encompassing stare, as though I were taking back something of  
 them to the end of my line?  
 But all I do bring back home are minimal congenetics,  
 nothing indiscreet, nothing judgemental.  
 I'm trying to take it all as it comes, but nothing appears to tread on my  
 toes or clip me round the ear.

The song of the train in its bends.  
 The 'Prince of Brittany' is a sort of cauliflower.  
 I've never been between two stations on foot, unlike graffiti artists  
 who follow a large red arrow on a white background leading straight to  
 an electric panel – an alarm maybe?  
 There is a rather obscure language of tunnels, which drivers  
 understand,  
 and which does not include among its possible sentences 'I love you'.  
 But who knows if, in the throes of love, a driver  
 doesn't communicate his joy to a particular piece of ballast which he  
 alone picks out or to the electric voice-box  
 announcing the approach of ALEXANDRE DUMAS  
 where, for instance, at this very moment, his lover is at work in an  
 office?

Here the town's bees multiply their efficiency,  
 140 passengers standing, 24 passengers sitting,  
 a measure marked up that doesn't take into account the folding seats,  
 fathers' laps, mothers' breasts, nor those present in spirit.  
 The child advertising *Axion*, a brand of washing powder,  
 has a tee-shirt that's so white, it's almost invisible.

## 9

I'm composing this line at the very end of the permitted time,  
which is why it's only (why 'only'?) auto-descriptive.

I write in an extremely cursive hand and I've just dotted the second  
'i' of 'iptive' as though I were a distant archer hitting a bull's-eye.  
It is, in fact, perfectly placed.

A beggar, still conscious despite Baudelaire, has just fruitlessly crossed  
the carriage lengthwise.

When, in disgust, he gets to the end, he spots an apple on the floor and  
picks it up

then proudly places it in his cap.

'Doctor Stabbed to Death with Scissors', a newspaper proclaims across  
four columns.

A girl is reading *The Comedy of Errors*.

But it doesn't make her miss her station.

## 10

I'm coming back late from Montreuil with numbered books, the  
numbering machine was out of order.

A mosquito and two umbrellas.

I watch the mosquito, which seems to have it in for one of the  
umbrella-bearing ladies.

It comes back towards me to get itself swatted dead on my sleeve.  
To make absolutely sure, I then locate it on the floor and squash it  
under my heel.

Carrion station.

A girl is reading *Tell Me Who You Haunt*. Another, *Mini Map of Paris*.

Another still isn't reading, but her eyes are red.

'In two minutes, I sent my mini-CV to 10 companies.'

'No more feet, only metres.'

End

If twelve months of metro poems end here,  
end and will never begin again in quite the same way,  
it's because I'm beginning to think that I could now compose  
convincing metro poems while lying in bed.



# Paul Virilio on Georges Perec

*Interview by Enrique Walker*

*The text that follows is based on an interview carried out in Paris on 28 June 2001.*

EW: You met Georges Perec at the beginning of the 1970s, when you were both invited by Jean Duvignaud to join the editorial board of the new journal *Cause commune*.<sup>1</sup> This took place in the aftermath of the events of May 1968, which were undoubtedly a key precedent in the definition of your agenda. On the one hand, you opened up a forum for debate that was expressly outside of the ideologies of the time; on the other, you placed your object of investigation at the margins of prevailing discussions. What was the journal's programme?

PV: *Cause commune* attempted to decipher events. But instead of looking at the political scene, we looked at facts – facts of various kinds. We looked at films, at works of art, at consumer goods. In other words, we looked at the world through its new symptoms. We had emerged from the events of May 1968 with a deep sense of disappointment – I had been very much personally involved, particularly in the storming of the Théâtre de l'Odéon – and consequently we set out to create a journal that had what we might call a 'post-1968' agenda. We were aware that we could not simply follow the predominant discourses, ideologies that had just failed before our very eyes. We had witnessed the collapse and abandonment of the leftist vision. It was not yet the implosion of communism, but it was the implosion of leftism. And it was precisely our experience of the post-1968 period that made the journal extraordinary. To some extent we represented the idea that May 1968 was a literary rather than a political revolution: Cohn Bendit and all the rest were just play-acting – political play-acting. That is to say, it had all ended up being a farce. In 1968 nothing changed in political terms, but everything changed in cultural terms. (The stress has too

often been put on the political aspect.) It is not by chance that writers such as Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari appeared immediately after 1968. They embody the poetics of post-1968 man. And so did our work at *Cause commune*. Hence our approach to the city, for instance, no longer connected to traditional notions of urban geography (cadastral survey, social classes, concentration, density and other phenomena); rather, it connected to what we termed the 'infra-ordinary', i.e. what we do when we do nothing, what we hear when we hear nothing, what happens when nothing happens. Outside of the city nothingness can perhaps exist – or almost nothing as Vladimir Jankélévitch<sup>2</sup> used to say – but it certainly does not exist in the city. In the city there is never a void. There is always background noise, there is always a symptom, a sign, a scent. So we were interested precisely in those things which are the opposite of the extraordinary yet which are not the ordinary either – things which are 'infra'.

EW: The notion of the infra-ordinary only emerged in the fifth issue of *Cause commune*, but in retrospect it seems to have been at the core of your programme. We can actually find it in embryonic form in one of your goals at the outset of the journal: 'to undertake an investigation of everyday life at every level, right down to the

recesses and basements that are normally ignored or suppressed'. It was also particularly influential on Perec's descriptive texts.

PV: The name of the journal was another way of connecting to the common, to the banal, to the quotidian. In fact, our goal was to be journalists of that which did not seem to interest anybody, to talk about things that were not obvious. In other words, we wanted the journal to be political, economical, cultural, but we would still talk about the things which were to one side of these categories. The infra-ordinary was already precisely that. For example, I wrote an article on Watergate.



## every building is implicated in a process of constant transformation and at some point architecture must address this phenomenon

Obviously everybody at the time was writing about Watergate, but I wrote about the building. In other words, I said that Watergate was an architecture, and an extremely interesting one. I focused on the building to show that although we talk a lot about the events we do not talk enough about their setting. Events take place, Watergate was a place. The term event was very important at the time; the rediscovery of the notion of the event was one of the themes of the post-1968 period. So, if every event takes place (that is to say takes place somewhere), there had to be a space in which the events of the city – the political events or events of other kinds – would be analysed in relation to their place, where they would be linked to their own situation.

EW: Most of your articles in *Cause commune* deal precisely with the meeting of these two components – events and spaces – particularly with the effect of the former on the latter, an issue that architecture was then starting to address. This is the case in articles such as ‘Habiter l’inhabituel’, ‘Le Mû’ and ‘Ailleurs commence ici’, all of which deal with notions of *détournement*.

PV: At that time I was particularly interested in the notion of transgression in architecture. So I analysed buildings that had somehow been transgressed in terms of their use – churches that had become garages, garages that had become museums, and so on – as well as in terms of more specific actions, such as entering a church on horseback, or riding down a flight of stairs on a motorbike, or driving a car over rooftops (incidentally at the time there was a film in which cars did drive over rooftops). So I investigated transgressive situations in every possible realm, and deployed them so as to emphasize that they are part of the territory of architecture, and that there is no single object that might resist being some day transgressed in one way or another. ‘Habiter l’inhabituel’ meant to inhabit the

mutations, rather than merely to inhabit the buildings. In other words, every building is implicated in a process of constant transformation and at some point architecture must address this phenomenon. I was also interested in other forms of *détournement*, such as the urban riots in America – Detroit, Newark, and so on. On the one hand, they connected to my interest in war; on the other, they were, for me, a pathological sign of what I thought would emerge in Europe, a whole new urban reality that we had not yet witnessed. 1968 was not, of course, an urban riot; it was merely events – ‘les événements de soixante-huit’ as they are usually called in French.

EW: A couple of years prior to the outset of *Cause commune*, Perec had started a project named *Lieux*, which tackled the description of twelve Parisian sites in two different modes – memory mode and *in situ* mode – over a span of twelve years. On the one hand, this connected to an overall autobiographical project he had been carrying out; on the other, it connected to an emerging interest in space. I would say the project was actually reshaped during the *Cause commune* years, when the interest was displaced from the former to the latter, before the project was definitively forsaken in the mid-1970s. By then, most of Perec’s projects were actually

concerned with space, notably *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien*<sup>3</sup> – the description of a thirteenth site which, as a matter of fact, was published in *Cause commune* – and *Espèces d’espaces* – the first volume of your collection *L’espace critique*, published by Éditions Galilée.

PV: As you said, *Espèces d’espaces* was the first book of my collection *L’espace critique*, and was actually commissioned by me. I invited Perec to write a text by asking him to do with space what he had earlier (when he wrote *Les Choses*) done with objects, because ‘things’ take place, just as events do. The question of space was of course central to my



## What interested Perec was the potential of the banal to become remarkable, that is, how an ordinary sign can become extraordinary.

collection, so Perec produced a 'bestiary of spaces', as he first termed it. And he planned to give me a sequel in which he would carry out a similar project, but with mathematical spaces. *Lieux* was a rather personal project – Perec did not talk much about it to us. He mentioned it, showed us two or three things, but did not really share it with us at all. But I would say that his project aimed at exhausting time. Perec would periodically return to these places in order to see what would change, to see whether he could see time grow in space just as we see it grow in the images of Painlevé (those pictures of the accelerated sprouting of a plant, for instance). He wanted to unveil, through a periodical survey of each of the twelve different places he had chosen, what we might term the 'growing of the real'. That is, to see the 'real' (*réel*) grow out of the 'present' (*actuel*). Each return to the site would set the present in motion and make it become another 'real'. It was an attempt at a new kind of voyeurism, one in which what was at stake for Perec was actually the chance to see himself age. *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*<sup>3</sup> was different – there he was trying to exhaust a place rather than time. He would not return to it, so he took three consecutive days to grasp everything that passed through the range of his perception. (You may know I appear in the text as I passed by place Saint-Sulpice while Perec was carrying out this project.) So he attempted to record everything, as would a surveillance camera: to record the ordinary, the banal, the habitual. That is, the signs of an event to which we may not have paid any attention, that we may not even have perceived. What interested Perec was the potential of the banal to become remarkable, how an ordinary sign can become extraordinary. At the time we were rediscovering the values of observation – the fact that looking is not self-evident. We look but we do not see; so how *must* we look in order to see? (Which means not just to see but actually to penetrate things.) We were very much aware that there are unknown things concealed by what is

visible, things that are hidden not in the obscure, but in the obvious. At the time there was actually a much more broad-based rediscovery of the visual, which was influenced by photography and the cinema in particular. The cinema, for example, was then inventing a new hand-held camera – the Steadicam. And the Steadicam had emerged from the Vietnam war: a device that was used to support American machine guns that were too heavy to hold unaided was now being used to support a camera. Cinema culture would, in turn, make us all cameramen. So there was an emerging cinematic and sequential vision that would open up for literature a new way of writing. The *nouveau roman* had already sketched this out, but in a purely literary way. This time, however, it was much more visual; in fact, literature would become more and more visual. This also explains our interest in drifting. For me – and I would say for Perec too, in his own way – the city is a film, one in a state of continuous metamorphosis, one in which not only is everything animated but everything is also incessantly accelerated. Everything passes by, everything is always in the process of unreeling. And you cannot see this film if you stand still – walking is the *tête de lecture* of this film.

EW: As a matter of fact, in your recent article 'Un homme qui marche'<sup>4</sup> (a pun on the title of Perec's third novel, *Un homme qui dort*) you refer to him as 'a man of the crowd', a drifter: 'In my memory', you say, 'Georges Perec appears in motion'. You also suggest a connection to the Situationists that had, up to that point, remained unacknowledged. To some extent, Perec does belong to a long-standing tradition of Parisian drifting, one that can be traced back to Baudelaire, the Surrealists (Aragon and Breton) and Debord, amongst many others. It is also a tradition that is somehow continued after him by Réda and Maspero.

PV: I would say that rather than a situationist drifter, Perec was a drifter



Cristobal Palma

## our relation to war was one of pure spectacle: we watched the world collapse. Therefore, we learnt how to look.

who hid. He who hides is often obliged to walk aimlessly on the streets because (like the ‘man of the crowd’ – I deliberately referred to Poe in my text)<sup>5</sup> that is where he best goes unnoticed. As you may have realized, my text denounces the infantilization of Perec – there are some who seek the goal of transforming him into the *Le Petit Prince*. For me, instead, there is a sociological and political dimension to his work that has been systematically ignored – or rather censored – under an excessive insistence on the aspect of play. The Perec with whom I drifted was connected to a deep knowledge of the city, a knowledge that was atavistic to him. He was the *passe-murailles*, he existed but did so just through his drifting – as all his work shows. To start with, Perec was a man of the city, not a man of the countryside – he profoundly disliked the countryside. He was, in fact, what we might describe as an urban nomad, and the urban nomad is by definition political. That was the case with Restif de la Bretonne, the first drifter, as well as with Walter Benjamin and Guy Debord. And I would say that there is a tragic dimension in Perec’s work, not simply one of play and poetics. Perec and I were children of the war. Children do not take part in wars, but they do look – they are voyeurs, they are bystanders. So Perec and I were voyeurs of war. For us war was an enormous spectacle. He took refuge in the Alps, in the region of Vercors, and I took refuge in Nantes. (And then he discovered that he was Jewish and that he had to be hidden. I was not hidden but my father was because he was an Italian communist.) So our relation to war was one of pure spectacle: we watched the world collapse. Therefore, we learnt how to look. This is certainly at the root of our interest in the infra-ordinary – those signs and symptoms that he and I learnt to interpret in order to survive. In my opinion this is a very important element of Perec’s work, and also of my own. If I am interested in speed and in war (though speed and war were one and the same thing at the time – *blitzkrieg*) it is perhaps because I

was trained to read signs when there was not enough time to analyse them. One had to be fast and perceptive, one had to understand everything in the blink of an eye.

EW: War was in fact at the origin of Perec’s work – the construction of the memories of a childhood of which he said he had been deprived.

PV: As I said, we were children of the war. Which means that it was quite natural for us to return to this tragic past. That is the reason why I fight against the way Perec is read today; we cannot understand Perec without the tragic. I believe there is something extraordinarily violent in Perec’s poetics as there is something extraordinarily violent in my own work. In fact, without war I probably would not have written. This is an aspect of our past that we cannot erase, and our past is monstrous.

### Notes

1. *Cause commune* was published nine times between May 1972 and February 1974. Its editor-in-chief was Jean Duvignaud, while the editorial board included Alain Bourdin, Christine Brunet, Pascal Lainé, Françoise Maillet, Georges Perec and Paul Virilio. Other contributors included Henri

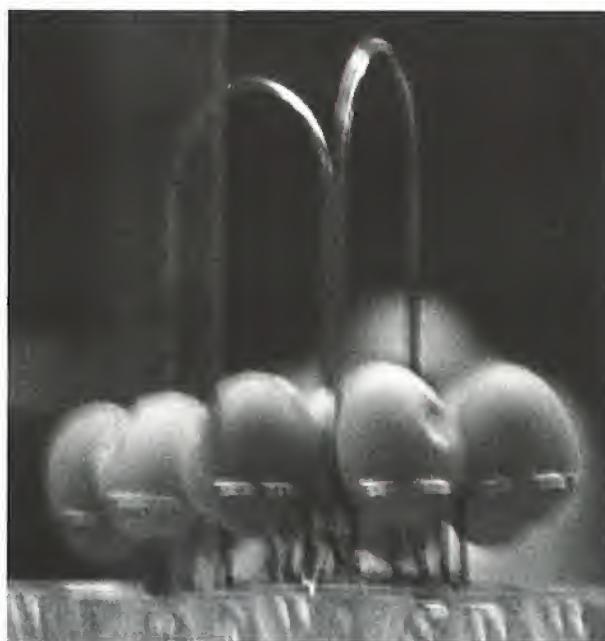
Lefebvre and Marshall McLuhan. The publication ceased in 1974 when the publisher underwent a change of ownership. From 1975 it appeared in the form of a paperback series as part of Christian Bourgois’s 10/18 collection.

2. Vladimir Jankélévitch (1903–85) was a prominent philosopher and musicologist. A member of the Resistance during the Second World War, he joined the students in May 1968. The three volumes of *Le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque rien* form one of his best known works.

3. *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien* was first published in *Cause commune* (Collection 10/18, no.936, 1975), pp. 59–108, and republished as a book in 1982.

4. Paul Virilio, ‘Un homme qui marche’ in Paulette Perec (ed.), *Portrait(s) de Georges Perec* (Paris, 2001). Translated on pp. 136–7 of this volume.

5. Virilio is referring here to Edgar Allan Poe’s short story ‘A Man in the Crowd’.

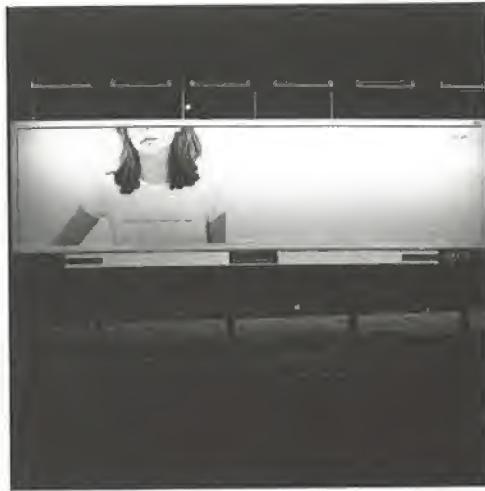


Image/Space

B



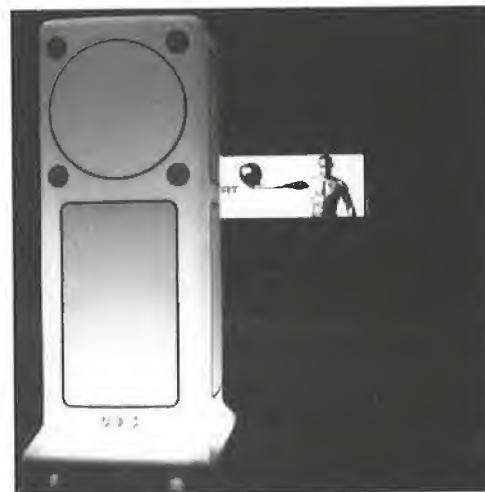
Carlos Villanueva Brandt



## Image Urbanism

The experience of the city is recorded, over a period of time, through a series of photographs. These reveal an intricate relationship between a space suggested by images and the physical reality of urban space.

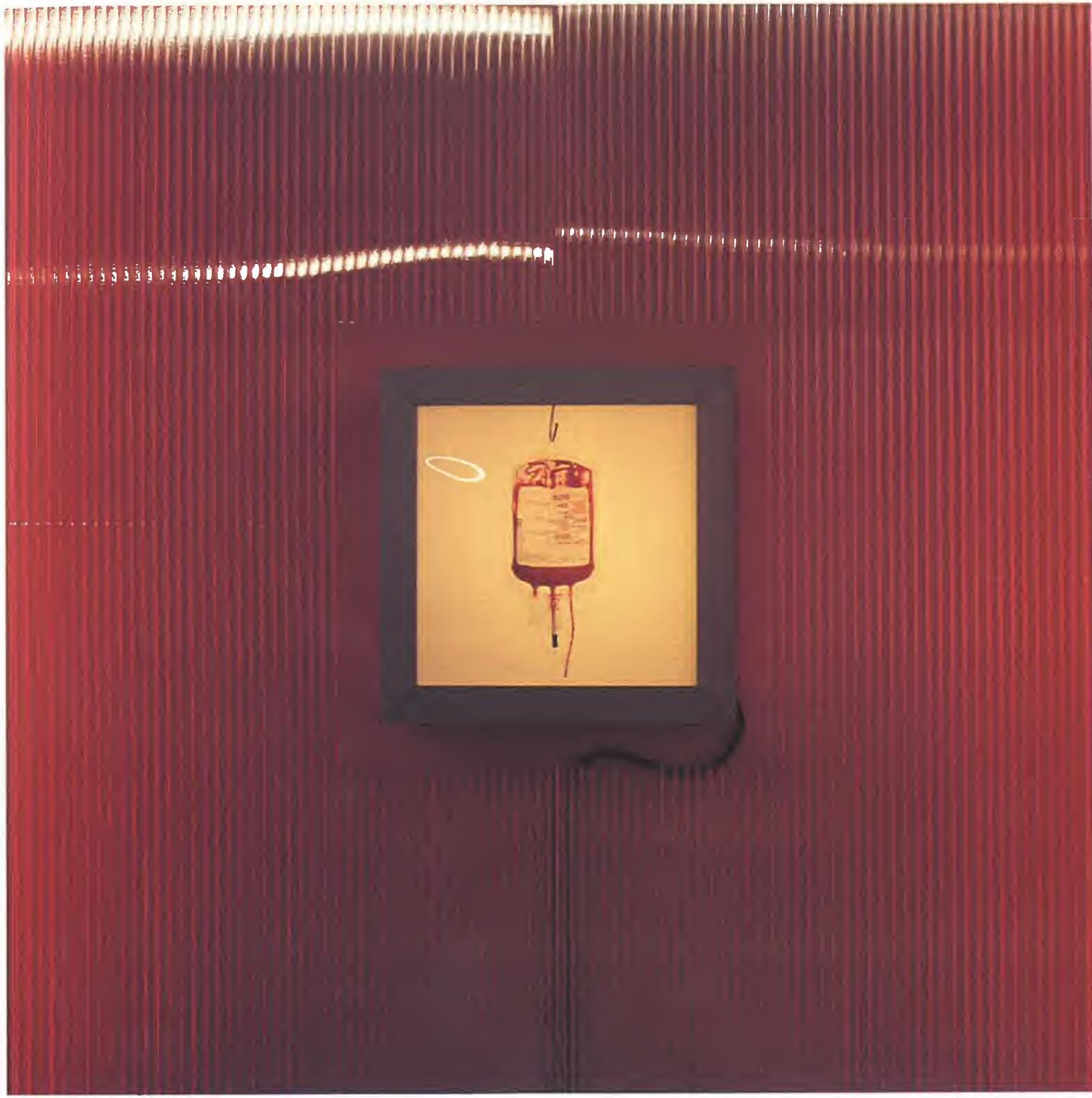
The majority of the photographs were taken in places of transition and movement, such as Vauxhall Cross, London, where images in the



form of advertising billboards provide a live cultural reference. The images generally portray an alternative spatial context, a parallel experience and, commonly, an anthropomorphic focus. The rules that set up the images differ from those that control the context, but the consequence of this is that the images, although at times alien, tend both to articulate and to inhabit the contextual space.

In these particular locations, image space and physical space overlap and generate an evolving urban condition. This sets up an active dialogue between the virtual and the real that continuously transforms the spatial configuration of the city.

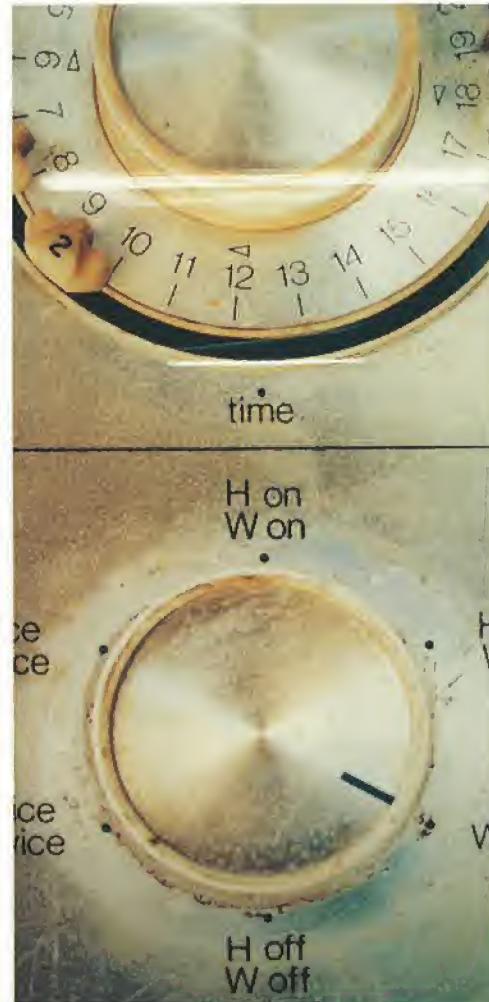
The first photograph was taken in October 1996 and the most recent in November 2001.





## Image Architecture

The brief was to redesign the offices of Spin, a multimedia design company located in a South London warehouse. The space was laid out as a 25-metre-long workspace with several adjacent rooms. In response, the architectural project reassesses both the entrance and the overall space in terms of physical objects, conceptual lines and images.



Three types of elements are introduced into the space: furniture (tables, benches and light-boxes), screens (wall screens, doors and light-shades) and images (variously sized light-boxes).

The entrance space is defined by a circle, 5 metres in diameter, painted on the floor and circumscribing a large circular table (3.6 metres in diameter) incorporating a central light-box. The table, lacquered in deep orange with blue stripes, generates a distributive element or 'roundabout' as an introduction to the existing workspace. Seating at the entrance is provided by means of a 3-metre-long undulating bench and the surrounding walls are articulated by large translucent screens lit by coloured fluorescent strips and containing small central light-boxes.

Further large light-boxes, 2.4 x 1.2 metres in size, and suspended light-shades create different axial relationships along the length of the existing office.

Two principal cross axes are established: one to the meeting room and the other to the room containing the pool table.

The pool room, painted deep red, is separated from the main space by means of a large sliding plastic strip door and contains a pool table which has been recovered in red felt.

The meeting room is similarly separated by a large sliding translucent door and contains a new orange lacquered meeting table with a central light-box positioned on axis with a blue lacquered wall panel incorporating a small light-box.

The design was set up so that CVB Architecture would be responsible for the spatial layout of the images and Spin would be responsible for the images contained in the light-boxes.

The resultant space is generated by both the chosen images and the spatial configuration in the same way as the billboards articulate the urban space.

*The photographs show the entrance area (p.22), entrance area detail with the bench (this page, bottom left), cross axis from the pool room (p.24) and cross axis into the meeting room (this page, top left). In this instance, the theme chosen for the shown images is the colour red. Photographs by Carlos Villanueva Brandt.*





# Paris

## Created and Destroyed

My spaces are fragile: time will wear them down,  
will destroy them: nothing will any longer resemble  
what was, my memories will betray me, forgetfulness  
will seep into my memory, I will look, without recognizing  
them, at a handful of yellowing photographs with crumbling  
edges. No longer will there be written in white porcelain letters  
stuck in an arc on the mirror of the little café in rue Coquillère:  
“Ici, on consulte le Bottin” and “Casse-croûte à toute heure”.

Georges Perec

## Andrew Leak

As the foreword to ‘Scene in Italie’ makes apparent, the texts presented here are fragments of a much larger project that never came to fruition. The intention was to visit twelve places in Paris, a different one each month, and to describe what he saw there. These texts – transcriptions of reality – were labelled by Perec ‘reals’. He would also describe the same twelve places from memory, again at a rate of one per month. These texts were labelled ‘memories’. This project was designed to last twelve years, and would have produced 288 texts: 144 (12 x 12) ‘reals’ and 144 (12 x 12) ‘memories’. But this project was far more bizarre and more grandiose than may appear from Perec’s laconic description. He did indeed intend to visit a different place each month, but the essence of the project is contained in the establishing of the schedule, rather than in its execution. The choice was between the arbitrary and the necessary: he could have simply written down a list of months and ascribed – on an arbitrary basis, or resorting, perhaps, to alphabetical order – a different place to each month. The aleatory, however, was anathema to Perec. Moreover, this project was to last twelve years: how could one a) describe each of the places in a different month each time, and b) ensure that the place described from memory was never paired with the same place described *in situ* more than once? The answer lay in mathematics, or in the branch of mathematics known as combinatorics. In the meetings of the Oulipo (the Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle, or Workshop for Potential Literature), a group to which Perec had belonged since 1967, he had encountered the creative possibilities afforded by the use of magic squares. In 1960, Bose, Chakravarti and Knuth had published a paper entitled ‘On Methods of Constructing Sets of Mutually Orthogonal Latin Squares Using a Computer’, so Perec wrote to the US-based mathematician Indra Chakravarti outlining his project and asking him to provide him with a set of such squares to the order of 12. These squares distributed the numbers 1 to 12 around a 12 x 12 grid in such a way that no single pair of numbers recurred in any of the 144 squares.<sup>1</sup> The ‘real’ places were numbered 1 to 12, as were the ‘memory’ places, so that in each square there would be a pair of numbers, one referring to a place to be described *in situ*, and one referring to a place to be evoked from memory. All that remained was to distribute the months of the year across the absciss, and the years themselves down the ordinate: the result was a *mode d’emploi* of the next twelve years – from January 1969 in the top left corner, to December 1980 in the bottom right.

All of Perec’s so-called ‘oulipian’ works were, by definition, governed by constraints of one kind or another. These constraints normally applied to the formal characteristics of the work, principally the letter: the lipogram, the palindrome, the

heterogram, etc... Later, Perec would adapt the orthogonal Latin bi-squares to provide him with the scaffolding of his masterpiece, *Life A User’s Manual*; in that novel, it was the content of each chapter that was pre-determined. *Lieux* (Places), to use Perec’s name for his project, was different in one crucial respect: the constraint bore not on formal characteristics, nor on plot elements, but on real time and space: the writer himself was physically constrained to be, periodically, in a certain place at a certain time, for the next twelve years!

The places themselves were chosen because they belonged to a dead past; these were places in Paris that had been of significance for Perec in his earlier life – places of memory. In the case of the four places presented here: place d’Italie was close to the room that his friend Michel had occupied and where, in 1955–6, Perec had typed up his first novel, *Les Errants*; rue de la Gaîté was linked to his friend Jacques Lederer; rue de l’Assomption (no. 18) was, essentially, Perec’s ‘home’ – it was where he had lived with his adoptive parents, his maternal aunt and uncle, Esther and David Bienenfeld, between 1945 and 1960; the Carrefour Mabillon, finally, was connected to his wife, Paulette, whom he had married in 1960.

As Perec remarks, the ‘experiment’ stopped in 1975, but it had faltered long before that. It may be true that any formal artistic constraint functions precisely because it is liberating and irksome in equal measure (think, for example, of the sonnet form, or the conventions of genre), but the spatio-temporal constraints imposed by the programming of *Lieux* seem to have been experienced by the writer as plain irksome from the outset. One might expect a new project to inspire at least an initial enthusiasm, but the dates of the texts suggest otherwise: the very first ‘real’ (Mabillon) is dated 31 January 1969, as though the chore had been postponed repeatedly until the last possible moment. Note how many of the ‘reals’ are dated on the last day of the prescribed month, or even a few days into the next month, or even five months later... The writing itself is often marked by reluctance (short, hurried jottings dashed off on the way home), by boredom (‘I can’t be bothered to note them all down’, or ‘etc.’ – Perec wrote elsewhere that the essence of making a list resided in never writing ‘etc.’) or by revolt (‘rue de l’Assomption bores me shitless’). So disaffected did he become with the project that, for an eighteen-month period in 1973–4, he abandoned it completely, picking it up again in a burst of frenetic activity at the end of 1974, only to abandon it definitively in September 1975.

In the circumstances, one is entitled to wonder precisely why Perec embarked on *Lieux* in the first place. There is no

Opposite: *The Gold Rush*, see page 49.

# CHARLES CHAPLIN



la ruée vers l'or  
GOUD KOORTS

UNITED  
ARTISTS

straightforward answer, but a few ‘facts’ might map out the background against which some kind of answer could take shape. The project was conceived amidst the accumulating rubble of his first serious love affair; the place associated with that affair (the Ile Saint-Louis) is the emotional centre of the project: a centre fragmented and distributed about the network of seemingly equivalent places established by the 12 x 12 grid described above. The effective end of the affair came in February 1971; in May of that year, he embarked upon his third course of psychoanalysis; the analysis ended in June 1975, and the project was discontinued three months later. The question as to whether *Lieux* was a failure or a success depends on what one believes it set out to achieve. The experiment produced some 133 texts (and not 24, as Perec states). No sooner had the project been abandoned than he set about distributing the ‘off-cuts’ (see Notes below): only (some of) the ‘reals’ were published, the ‘memories’ remaining sealed in their brown-paper envelopes.<sup>2</sup>

What can these texts mean to us today? How can we read them? What do we read there, and how is what we read there related to what their author expected to read on the completion of his project? Perec was accompanied on some of his excursions by a photographer – the resulting photographs being slipped into the envelopes containing the texts. The punctual nature of the texts (‘2 April 1969, about six o’clock in the evening’) suggests, at least initially, an analogy with the photographic record: what was place d’Italie like at that particular moment in time? (A ‘moment’ that implied a duration of daguerreotypic proportions: the time of writing...) What was the weather like? Were there people in the streets? How were they dressed and what were they doing? What about the buildings? Precisely what was playing at the Théâtre des Mathurins on that day? Etc., etc. In brief, one could regard the texts as snapshots; records of a moment frozen into text, rather than captured analogically on photographic paper. At a purely historical level, such a reading of the texts could be justified, but it would run exactly counter to the actual effect of the texts: if anything, they demonstrate, pointedly, the antithetical nature of text and image: the photographic image gives everything to the eye, all at once (irrespective of the way the eye then goes on to ‘read’ the image), whereas the text unfurls reality through its own unfurling – in a necessarily linear fashion. The clearest example of this is ‘Comings and Goings in rue de l’Assomption’. The very title of the piece points, amongst other things, to the moving eye of the writer as he paces slowly, notebook in hand, the length of this long, rather featureless street. The writing moves, word by word, line by line, but the spectacle remains static. This remains the case in texts such as Mabillon and Italie, where the observer changes place in order to

observe from a different perspective, as if seeking to capture in a series of *Abschattungen* the phenomenal totality of the spectacle: here one is struck not by the analogue totality of the finished ‘picture’, but by the discontinuity introduced by the time required to change places. In this respect, *Lieux* is a text that foregrounds the time of writing itself – a time that, in conventional literary description, tends to remain imperceptible: a sort of temporal equivalent of the ideal ‘Archimedean place’.

To go further, one could look at the terms Perec uses to describe his project. The fullest account of *Lieux* is to be found in *Espèces d’espaces*. There, we read: ‘What I expect from these texts... is nothing other than the trace of a triple ageing: that of the places themselves, that of my memories, and that of my writing’.<sup>3</sup> On the face of it, such an expectation is not unreasonable: what else would one expect to find in texts written over such a long period of time? But on closer examination, these expectations come to seem more problematic. First, the places. Properly speaking, they change, rather than age. It would sound very odd to say that the Italie *quartier* had ‘aged’ since the commencement of the ‘grands travaux’ in the 1960s: leaving aside the aesthetics of the result, it has been entirely renovated, made new, rejuvenated even. The urban regeneration schemes implemented in Paris over the last forty years could have had as their motto: ‘out with the old, in with the new!’ Take rue de l’Assomption: the tatty old café (itself the vestige of an even older Parisian institution: the Auvergnat bougnat café-cum-coal merchant) disappears to make way for a sparkling new bank. The crumbling detached house, with its rusty iron railings and too spacious garden, makes way for a fashionable new apartment block. And this the whole length of the street. Rather than an ageing process, Perec seems to have captured a galloping capitalization of space. The bank replacing the café reads almost like a found metaphor for this process. In all of this, the ‘new’ is invariably qualified as ‘ugly’, for reasons that may have less to do with a purely aesthetic judgement than with a certain projective dynamic at work in these texts – to which I shall turn shortly.

Since we are not concerned here with the ‘memory’ texts, I shall remark only that it is not certain that memories ‘age’: they may become less vivid, more subject to supplementation by the imaginary, or even simply disappear, but they do not strictly speaking grow old. The nature of these ‘memory’ texts, linked to real places, is further problematized by the way the project is conceived: each new ‘memory’ arises necessarily on the ground of previous memory texts, such that, by the twelfth year, the memory is also the memory of a memory of a memory... To witness the ageing of the writing itself appears to be a more reasonable expectation. However, the ‘real’ texts were not exactly

written: they consisted of abbreviated jottings, notes taken down in Perec's own brand of literary shorthand. Normally, they were then 'copied out in neat' that evening, or the following day. Perec envisaged, on the completion of the project in 1980, removing the texts from their 'time capsules' (envelopes sealed with wax, in fact) and re-writing them for publication, thus, oddly, eradicating the very thing that he expected to find there: evidence of the ageing of his own writing. We have no idea how he would have arranged the 288 texts for publication: the creative work, as always, would have consisted in the work of montage. What seems certain, however, is that Perec would have had to confront the paradoxes inherent in the notion of 'ageing'.

For us, today, the project of *Lieux* remains forever a virtuality never to be realized: we are left with the texts, the writing. Let us then consider what Perec says about the writing itself. In the foreword to 'Scene in Italie', he states that the idea was to go to a place and to 'write down simply, flatly what [he] saw there'. What could be more straightforward, or more impossible? The act of seeing is constantly foregrounded in the texts: the choice of observation points; the repetitious 'I can see', 'I can make out', 'from here I can see'; the obstruction of vision (whether by passing vehicles, importunate fellow customers, carelessly parked mopeds or yellowing imitation-lace curtains). Indeed, what is there but cannot be seen is as important to the observer as what readily meets the eye: as much as they are filled by the visible, these texts are haunted by the invisible. The very titles of the texts (reinforced by the puns they contain) place the emphasis squarely on the act of seemingly neutral observation. But just how 'neutral' are the observations? Elsewhere, Perec wrote of noting down 'what caught my eye',<sup>4</sup> as though the ultimate responsibility for the text lay outside in the visible world, as though the eye were the passive receptor of striking external stimuli. Whilst, in one sense, this is clearly true, from a different perspective it could be regarded as an inversion of the process at work: why is this particular observing eye 'caught' by these particular details? Perec himself gives the lie to the stance of *a priori* neutrality when he remarks in 'Gaïté' that he is trying to be particularly attentive to the details of what people are wearing. The process is better thought of as one of projection: from inside to outside. One could argue, counter-intuitively, that ordinary acts of perception are in fact instances of what psychoanalysis would see as projection: what is 'seen' is not the thing, out there, but the image on the retina and the brain's interpretation of it – in perception, as in hallucination, we take what is inside for what is outside. The only difference between perception and hallucination – a practically important one, admittedly! – is that what one believes is 'out there' in an act of perception, normally

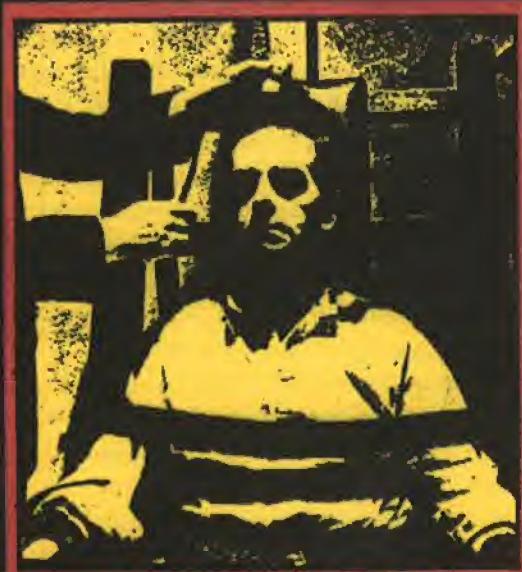
is. These 'neutral' observations are suffused with projection in a different, but related, sense. It is striking how different the moods of each piece are, all the more so since no one piece is ascribable to the mood of a particular moment, rather to the set of moments over the five- or six-year period in which they were written. 'Italie' is perhaps the most neutral of the texts presented here, the one where the details observed appear to the reader, for the most part, to have imposed themselves on the eye of the observer. 'Mabillon', not surprisingly, is the most animated, the most populous, but this animation serves only to underline the isolation of the solitary observer. 'Mabillon' is also notable for a vague air of menace, punctuated as it is by the patrolling of this post-1968 Left Bank location by various figures of authority: buses full of police, riot police, mobile guards and traffic wardens. 'Gaïté', despite the name, is the most sombre: each description is somehow underlit: the limit of the visible (e.g. rue Vercingétorix) is darkness. 'Assomption' is truly a catalogue of 'comings and goings'. The title works on two levels: the deambulations of the observer-writer and the demolitions and constructions being carried out in the street. But there is a third, hidden level: first Perec's uncle (1973), then his aunt (1974) 'disappeared' during the writing of this series. Little wonder that we read of no. 18 only that 'the shutters are closed on the third floor'. In the 1975 text, no. 18, rue de l'Assomption has itself disappeared, mysteriously, from the text: presumably into the 'hole' of the building site at no. 20.

In light of all this, it is hard to see how Perec could have seriously hoped to adhere to the self-imposed injunction to 'write simply, flatly'. What does it mean to write down 'flatly'? The implication is that the writing would avoid, as far as possible, adjectival and adverbial excesses: such adjectives as there are, do indeed tend to be as neutrally constative as possible: the colour of objects, their dimensions, their form, their relative positions. Verbs are either simply predicative of the existence of the object ('there is...'), or, more often than not, omitted altogether (a legacy, perhaps, of the jotted notes at the origin of the texts). But the descriptions of people are less 'simple', frequently toppling over into the novelistic: people are 'miserable-looking', 'tight-lipped', 'grim-faced', 'tired'. At times, the descriptions of people are marked by inexplicable bursts of irritation: just what had the unfortunate Hari-Krishnas done to annoy the normally mild-mannered observer? At others, typically when describing couples or families and their children, echoes of the vituperative prose of *A Man Asleep* can be heard ('The monsters with their big families, with their monster children and their monster dogs...').<sup>5</sup>

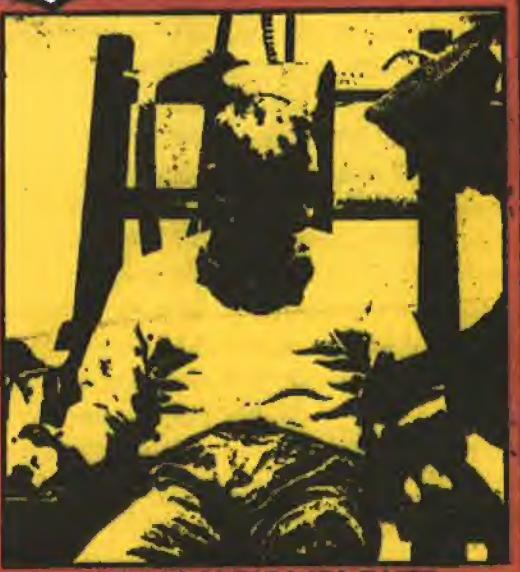
But to write 'flatly' perhaps involves something more than just avoiding contamination by the mood of the moment. The phrase

# USSACCO E VANZETTI

UN FILM DI  
GIULIANO MONTALDO



RICCARDO CUCCIOLA



GENNARO MARIA VOLONTE

MUSICA  
ENNIO MORRICONE

COSTUME  
JOHN BAILEY

CON



Scenari originali di Alfonso

RCA

implies to me not only the flattening out of reality on to the two-dimensional space of the page of text, but also the adherence to the uni-dimensionality of the present: to describe what you see before you is to eliminate the past of the spectacle, and to exclude any prospect of the future. In this sense, banality is the ideal to which the texts aspire: what is seen is what is, and nothing more. But the texts are inhabited by the past and haunted by the future in ways that make the present (in both the temporal and spatial senses of the term) interestingly problematic.

As already mentioned, the places themselves are chosen because of their associations with the past. Given that each 'real' is doubled by a 'memory', one would perhaps expect the past to be confined to the latter, but this is far from being the case. 'Gaîté', for example, contains references to past events which occurred in that place (e.g. the meeting in the 1950s with Jacques and his father). Lederer himself ('J. L.' in the text) periodically traverses other texts: a fleeting vision on his black motorbike in 'Mabillon'. 'Assomption', unsurprisingly, is full of the past: the remembered name of the ENT specialist, or of various classmates from the local primary school; the particular form of a door-knocker. The status of rue de l'Assomption as a place of memory is further underlined by the detail (which presumably 'caught' Perec's eye) of the commemorative plaque to a wartime victim of the Gestapo, Marietta Martin. And this historical past is reinforced by the political actuality of the place – as embodied in the wide range of graffiti defacing this most bourgeois of streets: from Maoist and Anarchist to Neo-Fascist and Royalist. In 'Gaîté', it is Perec's own Jazz Age that resurfaces in the memory that Bud Powell used to play in one of the theatres in the Impasse. The 'before' and 'after' also provide a narrative framework for many of the pieces: most begin with a note regarding how Perec arrived in the place (on foot, by Metro, passing through x on the way) and end with a reference to his imminent departure. At times, Perec seems openly to flout the decision to remain a prisoner of the present: four of the seven 'Assomption' texts begin either with a retrospective narrative or with a parenthesis that clearly implies a point of narration subsequent to the given date and time. Caught between a past that refuses to lie down and die, and a future inscribed as a potentiality in the scenes being observed (the whitened out windows of condemned properties, the premonitory hoardings, the announcements of imminent developments, etc.), the present – the ostensible subject of the texts – without actually disappearing, is constantly evanescent.

Lejeune has remarked on the metonymic nature of these

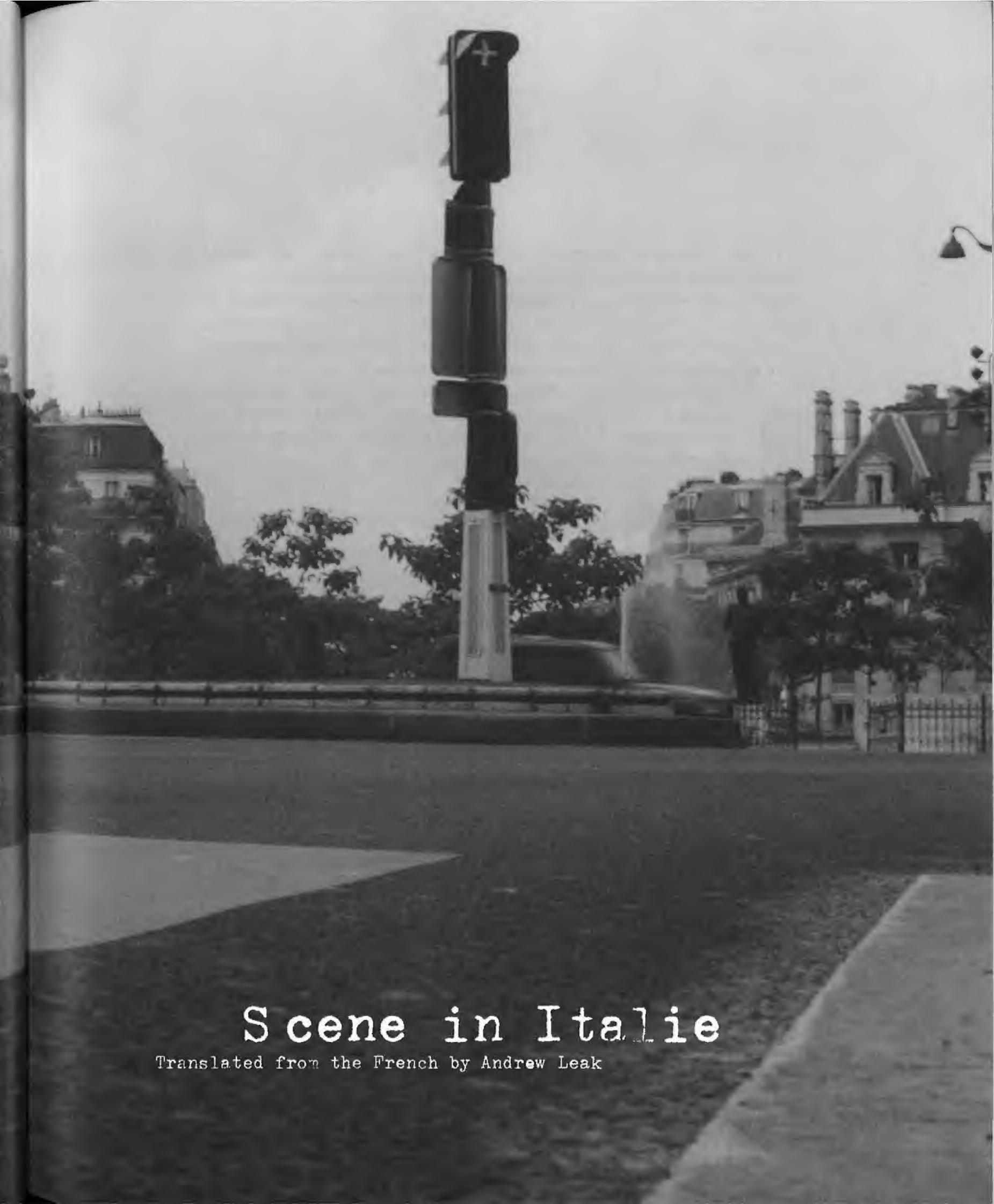
descriptions. All descriptions are, of course, in one respect metonymic, but he is also referring to the 'adjacent' quality of these places: each of them is near the actual place of memory, but is not the exact site of it. One could add that the places themselves prove difficult, if not impossible, to embrace, to pin down: where is Mabillon, where does it start and where does it end? At the limits of Perec's field of vision? And where Italie? The frustration of the observer, as he changes place to get a better view seems to reflect this idea that the description must forever remain adjacent to the real: to describe a place is constantly to displace it. One could equally well consider the metaphoric nature of these texts. In principle, the effort to write 'simply, flatly' should rule out the metaphorical, but metaphor is not simply given, it is also a function of how one chooses to read a text. It seems that the past is viewed essentially by the writer as that which has been destroyed. Perec's eye is 'caught' constantly not by signs of ageing and degeneration, but by signs of cataclysmic destruction. The city he describes is disappearing, inexorably, before his very eyes – and along with the places, the buildings, the monuments, will disappear the memories attached to them. The process observed in rue de l'Assomption (the demolition of 'quaint old houses' and their replacement by brash new developments) is replicated throughout the city. Paris itself becomes a concrete metaphor for the process of creation/destruction – that happens also, not coincidentally, to be the defining dialectic of artistic activity.

#### Notes

1. Not quite true as stated: a given pair of numbers will occur twice in the grid, but not in the same order (e.g. 2,3 and 3,2). In Perec's schema, the 'memory' texts were the series before the comma, and the 'reals' were the series after the comma.
2. The fullest account of *Lieux* is to be found in Philippe Lejeune, *La mémoire et l'oblique: Georges Perec autobiographe*, (Paris, 1991), pp. 141–209; see also David Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, (London, 1993), pp. 417–21.
3. Georges Perec, *Espèces d'espaces*, (Paris, 1974), p. 77. All translations from that text in the present introduction are my own.
4. *Ibid*, p. 76.
5. Georges Perec, *Things: A Story of the Sixties* (trans. David Bellos) and *A Man Asleep* (trans. Andrew Leak), (London, 1990), p. 202.

Opposite: *Sacco et Vanzetti*, see page 38.





# Scene in Italie

Translated from the French by Andrew Leak

SCENE IN ITALIE

Georges Perec

In 1969, I undertook the description of twelve places in Paris that were more or less precisely linked to certain moments or details of my life. The project was intended to last twelve years, and the idea was to visit one of these places every month - a different one each month - and to write down simply, flatly what I saw there. In addition, each month I would attempt to gather the memories bound up with one of these places.

The experiment stopped in 1975, and has been taken up and continued by other sorts of descriptions: poetic and photographic (*La Clôture*, about rue Vilin), cinematographic ('*Les Lieux d'une Fugue*', about Franklin-Roosevelt), radiophonic (about Mabillon, in progress).

The following text is one of the twenty-four resulting from the initial project.

I

2 April 1969, about six o'clock in the evening.

'Le Canon' café, on the segment between boulevard Blanqui and rue Bobillot. There is no spot, apart from the roof of a block of flats, from where one can get a satisfactory view of the whole square.

From where I am, I can see, in order:

a cylindrical Morris billboard with the word Dubonnet running around the top. It is advertising the public concerts of the O.R.T.F. for the month of April:

Berlioz, *L'Enfance du Christ*

The Orchestra of Paris, conducted by Serge Baudo, soloist

Alexis Weisenberg

Richter

Benedetto Michelangeli recital

Other (theatre) posters are only partially legible:

Daniel Gélin

Mathurins: Pour Karin?

Théâtre Municipal? Le meilleur est le roi?

I recognize a film poster: Funny Girl.

At the end of the raised promenade of boulevard Blanqui, there is a temporary bus stop (the 67) and a war memorial bearing a bust in bas-relief.

On the other side of the boulevard, a café which is, as it were, the counterpart of the one where I am.

Then a patisserie.

Most of the square - as far as the town hall of the XIIIth arrondissement - is hidden from my view by the Morris billboard and the mass of trees (even though they are still without leaves).

Some small green trees on the central roundabout.

Next to the exit of Bobillot Metro station, a news stall, with a blue canvas shelter bearing the words France-Soir.

(hidden by a yellow and blue coach whose terminus this appears to be, but which soon moves off down rue Bobillot)

(and then by buses, one straight after the other: 67, 67, 57).

An imitation lace curtain of yellowing nylon hides from me nearly all of the portion of the square between rue Bobillot and avenue d'Italie.

It's very bright. There are lots of people in the street. There aren't that many sitting at the sheltered tables outside the café: I am sitting right at the back; at the edge of the tables nearest the pavement, in front of me, there are two old Russian women (or Poles, or Serbs, or Bulgarians?) moaning about something or other and, also at the edge, but right at the other end, a lone customer. Then a girl arrives and sits down at the table next to the two old Russians.

There are more people inside, at the bar.

A Big Chief pinball machine on which nobody is playing.

All the way around the central roundabout, there are short red and white boards: probably to indicate road works.

A tall orange crane turns towards avenue de Choisy.

At six fifteen a police car turns into rue Bobillot at top speed, siren wailing.

Numerous yellow Post Office vans: bearing advertisements for loans at 3.5%.

A woman dressed in blue has tied up for a few moments a big hairy dog with a tail that curls up (like a husky, but brown) to a skinny tree just opposite me (probably to go and buy something in the charcuterie next door to the café on my right).

An old instructor from the Blanqui Driving School picks up a woman learner and her friend on the corner of the boulevard and the square.

SCENE IN ITALIE (cont.)

II

Wednesday 21 January 1970, about seven o'clock in the evening.

'Le Canon' café.

I came by Metro, exiting on avenue de la Gare, I hesitated between several cafés, including a big brasserie, 'Le Rozès'.

I was here last year too. I have the impression that the café has changed slightly: the bar now extends out almost as far as the outdoor seating area.

Postcards on displays, lemons, a bouquet of artificial flowers. Not many customers. Regulars. The landlord and the waiter are holding a loud conversation, shouting from one end of the room to the other.

An old customer, clearly a friend of the landlord (check overcoat, little beard à la Pierre Brasseur) has apparently returned after a lengthy absence. He has three children (or grandchildren?) now. The landlord is drinking a Dubonnet.

On the Morris billboard:

L'Aiglon, gala performance  
Concerts: Victoria de Los Angeles, the Bolshoi violins,  
Samson François, Karl Richter, Andor Foldes, Pink Floyd,  
Gérard Jarry, De Brunhof, Jazz at the T.N.P.: Phil Woods,  
Jean Langlais, Trajan Popesco, Billard-Azais, Isaac Stern and Jean Martinon, I Musici, Kempf conducts Beethoven, Lagoya. Roadwork signs: CITY OF PARIS. TRAFFIC IMPROVEMENT SCHEME.

Roadwork signs: CITY OF PARIS. TRAFFIC IMPROVEMENT SCHEME.  
Gigantic cylindrical cable holders from the cable-manufacturing plant at Sens.

The town hall, in the distance, has still got its illuminations that vaguely resemble a Christmas tree.

Free-moving traffic.

Nothing to see. A change of place, for a better view.

'Café de France' (on the other side of the boulevard).

It is certainly brand new, or at least completely transformed: smell of paint. In fact it's the grand opening, I can see that, not from the pots of flowers (that can last several days), but because Mme Jean has just come in carrying a magnificent bouquet (Oooh Madame Jean!). Philodendrons. A clientele made up of local shopkeepers. Paper on the ceiling, red brocade. Chandeliers. Everything is shining.

Poor view of the square. Between rue Bobillot and avenue d'Italie, at the very top of the buildings, there is a long neon advertisement for Kronenbourg:

I love my wife  
She buys  
KRONENBOURG  
In six-packs

'Le Rozès' café (avenue d'Italie)

On the window there are adverts for the New Year's Eve celebrations that have still not been wiped off: Live music. Dancing. Book your table.

Avenue d'Italie. Advertising boards:

GALAXY  
CONSTRUCTION OF A CAR PARK

Let your money  
Work for you

and beneath, inscribed in a circle:



Shops across the road: Italie Furnishings, Valery (tailor: sale now on), Jewellers, Opticians, Driving-school.

A small poster (just in front of me)

24 January '70  
Popular meeting  
Neighbourhood regeneration scheme  
Langevin sectional meeting

Newspaper kiosk: Paris-Match

Biafra  
Before the Prix d'Amérique

Ici Paris  
Cellulite  
She's quitting the telly  
(Shock decision of Alice Sapritch)  
Françoise Hardy's wedding  
8 o'clock. I'm drinking D.A.B. beer.

III

12 June 1971, about five o'clock.

I came on foot from Contrescarpe; I went down rue Mouffetard, where I bought a croissant (75c), and a piece of cheese of the 'Pyrennean tome' variety (1.25F), and then, in avenue des Gobelins, a bag of sweets (wine gums, fruit jellies, marshmallows, etc.) (1.25F).

Avenue des Gobelins has changed a lot. Its four cinemas, each now dedicated to exclusive screenings, are showing: *Les Assassins de l'ordre*, *La Maison sous les arbres*, *Love Story*, *Sacco et Vanzetti*.

Cut-price clothing shops. Household electrical goods.

An ageless population. Crowds of people. Doing their shopping.

Level with no. 59, there is an alleyway that ends in a porch and a staircase.

'Café de France', on the corner of boulevard Blanqui.

On the raised promenade of the boulevard there are men playing pétanque.

On the horizon, a new, white 'prefabricated' building; it looks like a radiator. And another block, grey. A blackish-brown crane. Weather's turned quite nice again.

Three OAPs. Two of them have already been chatting for a while in the street. The third one comes along, walking a little white dog.

In the distance, a building site. Advertising hoardings: Imagine life in Levi's! Pernod Pastis!

Sex techniques (a film: poster of the Venus de Milo).

Two children with back-packs.

In the foreground, an army lorry, parked. It's more a coach than a lorry. It's empty.

The driver is waiting.

Cars. People.

An old woman wearing slippers, a dress, or rather a smock, with a floral design against a dark background, and a mauve cardigan comes and greets the two OAPs (the third one, with the dog, is in here at the bar). They don't talk to her. Another woman turns up, blue pleated skirt with matching jacket and beret; she is carrying a flag.

They all go on to the raised promenade. Another man, with a blue forage cap and a flag. A gathering (of war veterans).

The coach seems to be for them.

They are probably going to lay a wreath at the foot of the war memorial.  
The wreath is laid by two old guys and a woman wearing a straw hat.  
A minute's silence.

They disperse.

The woman in blue had twenty or so medals dangling from her chest.  
Several of the others have more discreet rows of medals. The flag bears a  
cross of Lorraine and an English pennant.

Everyone gets back in the coach. On the orders of the woman in blue, the  
driver closes the doors.

Delicate negotiations?

The coach moves off, down boulevard Blanqui. In the back of the coach  
there are some spare wreaths, no doubt destined for other commemorations.

#### IV

Saturday 11 November 1972, about half past six.

I came by Metro, exited opposite the townhall, walked round in a  
clockwise direction, and, near boulevard de la Gare, entered the 'A la  
descente du métro' café.

It's dark. Mild and humid. It has been raining.

Free-moving traffic. The trees are a dark mass.

A few neon signs.

UNIC LANCIA FIAT: the letters flashing very quickly, on off, on off, etc.

A newspaper kiosk, lit: adverts for Nous Deux, Intimité, Télé Poche.

Much further off (avenue d'Italie) the carrot-shaped sign of a tabac ('Le  
Rozès')

Over towards Gobelins, on the roof of a building there is a neon sign  
E.D.F. ELECTRIC HEATING

A bus flying two little tricolours goes past.

Unfamiliar music is coming from the juke-box (a South-American rhythm?  
rock, more like).

A few dawdlers in the street.

A Hertz van, yellow.

I change vantage point.

'Le Rozès' café-tabac. At the covered tables outside.

In front of me, from a different perspective, the same LANCIA FIAT sign  
of the Cars-R-Us shop.

SCENE IN ITALIE (cont.)

Nearer, on the other side of the avenue, there is a furniture store. Then Valery (coats, dresses and ) Jewellers, Driving School, Cars bought and sold, engine tuning.

On the same pavement as the café: kiosk: *Télé Poche, Modes de Paris, Nous Deux.*

Oyster vendor.

The tables where I am sitting are lit by small lanterns bearing the letters D.A.B.

Luncheon vouchers are accepted.

In front of me, on the pavement: a yellow post-box; a dark-coloured metallic parallelepiped which, to my mind at least, is a transformer - or a phasing device - for the traffic lights on which are stuck the tattered remains of numerous bills, as well as one, a yellow one, that is still intact: Candella Conservatory. Piano Violin Voice Guitar Theory Flute DANCE.

Why, how, when do people go to cafés?

V

30 December 1974, about eleven in the morning.

I came on foot from rue Linné.

The cinemas in avenue des Gobelins are showing: *The Man with the Golden Gun* (James Bond), *Les Bidasses s'en vont en guerre* (with the Charlots), *Le Retour du grand blond, Borsalino, Robin Hood*.

Magnificent weather. Cloudless blue sky. The sun, to my right, has scarcely risen above the roofs of the buildings.

In the distance (avenue de Choisy?) there are two clusters of new buildings.

Leafless trees, many of them pollarded. The branches form complicated patterns (Japanese).

At the bus-stop, an advertisement for Gaston Lagrange cognac (drawn by Kiraz).

Between rue Bobillot and avenue d'Italie, a newspaper kiosk with adverts for *Intimité*, and *Nous Deux*. Next to it, partially hidden by the cars, a Morris billboard with an advert for Martini and, the only word I can see from here, 'MADELEINE' (Théâtre de la Madeleine, I imagine). To the far left (avenue de la Sœur-Rosalie), Air France buses.

(They are demolishing the café that used to stand on the corner of avenue de la Sœur-Rosalie, the one that used to be the terminus for 'Burgundy Coaches'. In February, according to the notice, a chemist's will be opening

there. As for the coaches - the landlord explains to a woman who has come to enquire - they will terminate at Porte d'Italie.)

(The front door of the flats is being replaced or repaired, perhaps in order to install an automatic entry system, or a system of individual keys.)

Between rue Bobillot and avenue d'Italie, I can make out a few shops: a shop selling tripe and roast meats, the Townhall Bakery (deserted, windows whitened out) a horse butcher's, a chemist's (which also does orthopaedics, pedicures and laboratory analysis), 'Le Rozès' brasserie.

A little later, after having approached this group of shops and entered the said brasserie:

This whole block, all the shops I just listed, including this café, are due for demolition in the near future: the chemist's, for example, has been closed since 15 June; it is likely that this is the one that is shortly going to re-open on avenue de la Sœur-Rosalie. The work has already begun in rue Bobillot, and there is every reason to suppose that it will be on a similar scale to that already undertaken on the other side of the avenue.

On the pavement, right opposite the café, a Wallace fountain, a post-box, two parallelepipeds probably for synchronizing the traffic lights (some freshly tamped earth nearby, and two labourers with a wheelbarrow), a newspaper kiosk (closed) with adverts for Télé Poche and Modes de Paris. On the windows of the café there are New Year's Eve decorations: musical notes and streamers.

A guy has come into the café to put up (any old how, I might add) a (very fine) poster for an exhibition of Willem Buytewech (1591-1624) at the Dutch Institute. Then he asks the woman at the till to stamp a piece of paper for him (proof that he has put up the poster). He has fourteen stamps on one piece of paper and two on another, and a whole pile of posters left to put up. Presumably, the Dutch Institute pays him a franc for each stamp.





# Glances at Gaîté

Translated from the French by Andrew Leak

GLANCES AT GAITÉ

Georges Perec

1

1 December 1969, six o'clock in the evening

Coming from the new Montparnasse station, I arrive in rue de la Gaîté by avenue du Maine. I was intending to stop in a café that I've known for many years, 'Aux Armes de Bretagne' (fried sausages, pinball machines) but it is closed, not, apparently, for refurbishment; it looks more as if it has gone bankrupt or been sold (in anticipation of a radical transformation of the quartier over the next few years: the new expressway will wipe out the whole of rue Vercingétorix).

I fall back instead on 'Les Mousquetaires' café, almost opposite, on avenue du Maine (I came here one day in '55 or '56 to look for Jacques and his father who were playing billiards). The billiard tables are still here. I think there are five of them. I can't see them, but I can hear, from time to time, the characteristic noise of the balls colliding.

Juke-box: Moustaki singing 'Avec ma gueule de métèque'.

A sprinkling of customers. A lot of single people. A semi-tramp with his glass of red. A Korean (or Japanese) who looks like one of the players from the Go club (I have the impression that he is looking at me as though he were trying to place my face). Two Algerians. A young chap with a beard, whose girlfriend arrives in the meantime, and who is joined a little later by another couple.

It's a poor observation point. You can't see rue de la Gaîté, only the badly lit avenue du Maine and the start of rue Vercingétorix, which is even darker.

The exit of Gaîté Metro station.

A lamp post covered in bills from the newspaper kiosk

Next

*Latist Späcial* (posted askew)

#### Magnus's racing tips

leaning against the lamp-post, beneath the little poster and, I think, hiding another one, there is a yellow moped.

The street is full of people. Very few followers of fashion (something of which I am trying to take special note): a very long overcoat in imitation leather, a sheepskin jacket.

Many of the people are carrying wrapped objects.  
Loaves of bread.

A minor scene at the bar. A man (a Martiniquan?) has knocked over a paper bag containing, amongst other things, a bottle of wine. He is wearing a cap. The landlord, in red waistcoat, is trying to help him repair the damage (it could have been a lot worse).

More loaves of bread, carrier bags, shoulder bags.

Work is tiring.

Grim, tight-lipped faces. Even the school children.

Very few idlers.

Tiredness at the top of the steps of Gaîté Metro station.

Moustaki on the juke-box again.

The shops are either barely lit or in total darkness. A hardware shop opposite the 'Armes de Bretagne'. A lingerie shop next door to that.

Bread, bags, newspapers.

I leave my observation post at about half-past six. I stroll around a bit, make some phone calls. I walk past the Gaîté-Montparnasse theatre where *La Mise en pièces du Cid* is running, past the 'Milles colonnes' restaurant, past a new fashion boutique (on the spot where I think there used to be a bookshop).

The cinemas on rue de la Gaîté are showing *Tout peut arriver*, *Les Professionnels* and *Desert Battle*.

I walk past the restaurant called 'Aux Iles Marquises' and leave by rue d'Odessa.

2

6 October nineteen hundred and seventy, one in the afternoon

I am in the little café opposite the Gaîté-Palace. The shops between here and rue du Maine, on the even-numbered side are:

a charcuterie also selling cooked meals

Singer

Revil shoes

the Gaîté-Palace cinema (where *Seven Men From Now* is showing)

'Les Chemiseries françaises' gentlemen's outfitters  
Ferel shoes

There are roadworks at the far end of the street

There are repairs being carried out to the front of the Gaîté-Palace.

Timeworn buildings.

People of modest means; very few dressed in the latest fashions.

The weather is overcast; it is trying to rain

One fifteen. 'Les Trois mousquetaires' café.

Steamed up windows. Fairly crowded. Hubbub.

The bar has perhaps been redone; it is in light wood and royal-blue plastic.

Noise from the billiards in the back room.

Not a lot of traffic, really, but plenty of passers-by.

Over the road, the 'Armes de Bretagne' (open): oysters, shellfish, post-theatre suppers, Paulanerbraeu (it does say 'braeu' rather than 'bräu').

A 28 goes past, empty.

The other cinemas of rue de la Gaîté are showing a James Bond festival, and Sortie de secours (with Régine); the theatres are staging Joe Egg, and Jeux de massacre; Gudy Bedos and Sophie Daumier at Bobino.

There are a lot of electrical-goods shops and fashion and accessories boutiques.

3

Sunday 31 October nineteen seventy-one

Six o'clock in the evening

Cold.

Came on foot via rue de Seine, rue Tournon, rue de Vaugirard, rue Guynemer, rue Vavin, rue Delambre. Lots of people in the streets and in the cafés: human warmth; the winter already.

The Gaîté-Palace is showing Branded with Chuck Connors.

I resist the urge to buy myself a big packet of gumballs, marshmallow teddies or pseudo fruit jellies. I have a coffee at 'La Belle Polonoise' (nicknamed La Belle Po); over the road, the 'Cage à pulls' knitwear shop, with its rainbow sign, a little further Bobino Dry Cleaners, under new management; further away still (invisible from where I am sitting) Bobino: Gilles Vignault.

People out walking in their Sunday best. Customers. Boredom. Groups. Families: husband, wife, baby in pushchair, little sister. Lone flâneurs, hands in their pockets.

Half-past six

'Le Gaîté' café.

Hercule et la reine de Lydie is on the programme at the Splendid (it is not, as I believed, a film by Cottavi)

At the Théâtre Montparnasse: C'était hier!

At the Gaîté-Montparnasse: Zamfir.

The little tabac next to the theatre is closed.

Here, there is more light. People checking the racing results in the papers. Lone men, above all.

At one table, two deaf people are talking to each other in sign language.

The landlord recommends the show at the Gaîté to one of his friends: "It's good, it's Romanian music... but it's good."

A discussion about the result of the tiercé: nobody knows yet how much the winning combination is worth. The waiter has got the winning numbers. A guy offers him 80,000 F for his ticket. The waiter gives it a moment's thought, then refuses.

A coffee and a box of matches: 1.30F

Six forty-five

'Les Mousquetaires'.

Over the road from the Metro.

Yet another café atmosphere: how could one differentiate them?

It's a lot bigger here.

Outside, a man is standing near the Metro station reading the newspaper: the racing results, as far as I can see, or the racing cards.

The yellow wood France-Soir kiosk. The headline of the Journal du Dimanche: In three days, from Opéra to Etoile in just three minutes thanks to Auber, the biggest underground station in the world.

People. Pinball machines.

Not that many people actually, but lots of noise (the height of the ceiling?).

Distant sound of billiards.

Rue Vercingétorix dark.

'Aux Armes de Bretagne': small red bulbs.

Next door, Singer: a cascade of small yellow bulbs.

People in large groups.

A man on his own, eating a bit of baguette.

An old lady, carrying a baguette.

Not much traffic in avenue du Maine.

The coffee I am drinking is disgusting (the coffee at the 'Belle Polonaise' is the only one worthy of the name 'coffee').

A man in yellow espadrilles, carrying a folded newspaper, is about to cross avenue du Maine. He is wearing a black, fleece-lined jacket.

Another man: he is holding a newspaper in the same way, but he is wearing an overcoat and hat.

Et cetera.

4

23 April nineteen seventy-two

Five o'clock

'Le Florida' café, on the corner of impasse de la Gaîté, across from avenue du Maine.

Opposite: a baby clothes shop: 'Catherine. Kids' Stuff'.

Just in front: the Montparnasse tower, which has just recently reached its full height (206 metres?). A flag is flapping from the top of one of the cranes.

The weather is quite fine. Long sunny spells.

Quite a few people in the streets.

I came via rue du Four, where I bumped into Roubaud, who had just met Roger K., then rue de Rennes where I met V. in the company of his young wife (a good day for strolling, it seems).

In rue d'Odessa, there were a lot of Sunday-afternoon dancers who had gone outside (with a stamp on the back of their hand) to get an ice-cream, presumably while the band was taking a break: there are a lot of dance-halls in the impasse; one of them is a theatre in the evening, I think it's the one where Bud Powell used to play.

Le Chat miaulera trois fois, a comedy with Francis Blanche as an SS officer,

is playing at the Gaîté-Palace.

M. Avisse bakery on the corner of the impasse de la Gaîté sells ices.

I think I just saw Jacques go past on his motor-bike.

A father (old) and his fifteen-year-old son.

A couple of eighteen-year-olds.

Families.

Couples. Couples of couples.

People with dogs. People out for a stroll on their own.

In rue du Maine, trees, a little park where one can sense, rather than see, children playing.

At the Bobino music-hall: *Rufus*.

In the cinema in impasse de la Gaîté: *Murphy* (a war film? with Peter O'Toole and Philippe Noiret?)

At the Théâtre Montparnasse: closed for rehearsals.

At the Gaîté-Montparnasse: *The Knack*.

At the cinema at the end of the street: *The Gold Rush*.

A couple and their son (5 yrs old) with a skipping-rope, which is getting in the way of a lady:

-- Oh, kids, for God's sake!

-- Just 'cos you're too old to have any yourself!

The dialogue concludes with

-- Why don't you just sod off!

*Five thirty*

'Les Trois mousquetaires'.

Openings made on rue Vercingétorix, which is blocked off to cars. Cranes. A small section of blue wall (wallpapered).

At about six thirty, having been to see Jacques, I came back down rue de la Gaîté. Near Bobino, I noticed an Arab restaurant that I don't think was here before: 'Au Tajine', next door to a shop that I think I have already seen: 'La Boîte à pulls' knitwear.

*27 February nineteen hundred and seventy-three*

*Seven thirty*

I came by Metro (packed) from avenue de Ségur.

GLANCES AT GAITÉ (cont.)

In the café on the corner of boulevard Edgar Quinet and rue de la Gaîté.  
Opposite: lingerie and babywear; above that, a board belonging to the Public Notices Agency with two election posters for the PCF: We trust the PCF.

Next door (no. 2): a jeweller's-watchmaker's.

Then a charcuterie, still open: the woman behind the till is chatting with a tow-headed woman dressed in black; the butcher is serving a young woman wearing a yellow bomber jacket.

Not many punters in the café at this hour: people playing pinball (piercing bells and buzzers).

Not many in the streets either, apparently.

Fur-lined jackets. Furs.

An old woman selling France-Soir.

The guys on the pinball machine have just won a game (the characteristic plop) - the players are two young men in raincoats.

The yellow customer leaves the charcuterie. Her big dog was waiting for her near the door.

Two more free plays on the pinball.

A fourth free play (a surprise bonus game, I think) but there's only one player now, the other one having left in a hurry.

People returning home. Or going out? Briefcases under their arms (sports bags, shoulder bags) or empty handed.

Lighting effect in the charcuterie, right at the back: a sort of panel of frosted glass turns, alternately, yellow, green and blue. Christmas-type lights.

I am drinking a foul coffee: 1.35F.

A quarter to eight.

In 'Le Florida' across the road from rue du Maine. At the Gaîté-Palace La Grande Vadrouille (De Funès, Bourvil, etc.) is showing.

Then: 'La Chemiserie Française' gentlemen's outfitters, and Ferel Shoes, then rue du Maine.

A little before that, invisible from here, next door to the charcuterie, there is a (new?) restaurant called 'Vac Club': gargantuan menu at 39F.

Apart from one animated corner (sounds of laughter), the café is empty. Nobody on the two pinballs ('Now' and 'Jungle'). On the far side of rue du Maine: 'Radio-Convention' No. 1 specialists in colour TV (on a banner).

In rue du Maine: 'Catherine, babywear and juniors'. On the same pavement as the café, on the other side of the little alleyway: M. Avisse, Bakery, Ices, Patisserie, Salon de thé.

'La Chemiserie Française': reduced items and oddments.  
The café has livened up a bit.  
I have drunk a Vichy water: 2.50F.

Ten past eight

'Les Mousquetaires' brasserie, avenue du Maine.  
A Suze: 2.90F  
In front of me: a building site.  
In the distance, a new building.  
'Les Armes de Bretagne' has been moved somewhere else: the building itself is still standing.  
Right next to the exit of the Metro, there is a little news kiosk (temporary?).

From memory (I should develop it: a sort of urban Kim's game):

At the Splendid: Dr No.

At the refurbished Cinéma: Last Tango in Paris.

At the Gaîté-Montparnasse: Un Pape à New York, directed by Michel Fagadau, with amongst others, Jean-Pierre Marielle.

At Bobino: a full programme (including Jean Constantin).

Shops:

Two couscous restaurants, then a sort of fast-food joint selling Tunisian snacks and oriental sweets;

'La Décothèque': home furnishings, everything that's 'now';

'Les Iles marquises' restaurant.

'Les Mille colonnes' restaurant.

Next door to Bobino: 'Europa' sound studios.

About half-past eight?

'La Belle Polonaise'

Lots of clothes shops

The Spring Fashions. Leather. 'Natalys'.

Refrigerators. Ex-Monoprix. Etc.

Opposite: A chemist's (open).

A restaurant 'Au Tajine' (couscous) (at no. 18).

'La Cage à pulls' knitwear (rainbow sign).

Hairdressers.

Bobino Dry Cleaners.

In the café the atmosphere is reminiscent of that on the big opening nights.

*Le Saut du Lit* is playing at the Théâtre-Montparnasse.

People in all the surrounding cafés.

At no. 14 'Aux Galeries de la Gaîté'. Free credit.

Hubbub.

Not far from me, a writer (?) has drunk a beer, eaten a slab of gruyère and is about to drink a decaffeinated coffee. He's threatening not to 'pass his piece for press' unless Belfond pays him what they owe him! He has seen Don Juan, and he is going to write an article on Bardot: Farewell Brigitte! Perhaps they are going to Bobino.

The bell has rung at Bobino, people are saying.

Mass departure, laughter.

Noise of the pinball machines.

6

21 June nineteen seventy-five

Five o'clock

'Les Mousquetaires' café.

At the end of the street, on avenue du Maine, there is a future giant shopping centre ('Darty Real' plus sixty shops) and behind that, the Sheraton Hotel.

Rue Vercingétorix is barely a memory.

The Metro stations have been changed.

The hardware shop on the corner of avenue du Maine and rue Vercingétorix is still there.

Nearly all of rue de la Gaîté, on the odd-numbered side has been gutted.

The theatres.

One is temporarily closed.

In the other, *La Fleur des mers* is playing.

At Bobino: *Dzi Croquettes*.

In the cinemas:

*Les jouisseuses*.

*The Mad Bomber*.

*Les Deux Gousses*, by José Benazeraf (no photographs).

There is nothing where Monoprix used to stand.

A couscous restaurant.

Arab patisseries.

Japanese restaurants.

'Les Mille Colonnes' restaurant.

A sex shop at the start of the street.

Muggy weather.





# Comings and Goings in rue de l'Assomption

Translated from the French by Andrew Leak

COMINGS AND GOINGS IN RUE DE L'ASSOMPTION

Georges Perec

4 July 1969, about four in the afternoon

I had a camembert sandwich and a glass of Côtes-du-Rhône at the café-tabac on avenue Mozart. Then I went and had a coffee sitting outside the 'Mozart 59' café on the corner of avenue Mozart and rue de l'Assomption.

There is a new building where 'Le Caméra' cinema used to stand.

Opposite the café, on rue de l'Assomption (on the even-numbered side), there is a shoe shop that has a sale on at the moment.

On the other side, diagonally across the road, the Jouen Bakery; it hasn't changed since it was totally modernized - that was a long time ago (my memory is very vague on this point; I might be confusing it with another bakery on the corner of avenue Mozart and rue du Ranelagh).

On the other side of avenue Mozart is the RATP training centre, still the same.

The café where I am has been totally transformed (modernized); it is more than likely that I came here once or twice in the fifties with Michel Rigoud.

Next door to the shoe shop there is an opticians. At no. 56, a hotel.

Virtually all of the businesses in the street are concentrated between rue Davioud and avenue Mozart.

**Walking down the street (noted down as I go)**

No. 54: Thébault butchers, that some butcher's boys are busy sluicing down.

In the corridor there is still a letter box in the name of Rigoud (a classmate from the local primary school who lived here)

No. 52: A small building (a private town house) with a gravel forecourt

No. 50: A shop with no sign and an opaque shopwindow. It appears to be an insurance broker's or an estate agent's (before, there was a coal and firewood merchant there - but not a 'bougnat': it wasn't a café as well).

No. 48: A chemist's, on the corner of rue Davioud.

On the other side of rue Davioud, a fish-poultry-fruit and vegetable shop; a crudely written sign announces that THE FISH ARE IN THE REFRIGERATOR. The cherries cost 4.50F a kilo: expensive.

On the odd-numbered side of the road, in order: a dry-cleaner's, a horse butcher's, a chemist's, a grocer's (a tiny shop), an upholsterer's; no. 31 is a group of apartment blocks that cut back obliquely towards place Rodin (place Jean-Paul-Laurens, avenue Théodore-Rousseau).

No. 46: Antiques: in the shopwindow there are some little blue Chinese horses

No. 44: Grocer's

No. 42: Hairstylist  
A dress shop (?) with a modernistic shopfront, wherein a lady is having a manicure (performed by an employee of the neighbouring establishment?)

No. 40: The Lycée Molière bookshop.  
The Lycée Molière. It doesn't appear to have changed. Has it had a face lift? On the odd-numbered side, a long series of residential blocks. At no. 17, a dry-cleaner's, then a tailor's: he is standing on the doorstep, in braces, then he goes into the back room which is lit by a lamp with a conical metal shade.

At no. 23B, people are moving in on the first floor: a huge corner flat giving on to rue de l'Assomption and rue du Général-Dubail. The furniture, which has arrived in a great yellow van, looks ugly.

On the even-numbered side, the commemorative plaque for Marietta Martin, that used to be affixed to the wall of the little provincial-style house where she was arrested (8 February 1942), is now stuck on the façade of a new, perhaps not even quite completed, block of flats.

No. 32: A detached house standing back from the street. A small gravel garden. On the iron gate, a business plate: Dr Clin, Ear, Nose and Throat specialist (I remember him) and Dr F. Clin, Medical Analysis Laboratory.

No. 26: A metal-studded wooden door, with a knocker shaped like a hand. I remember it well. Since then, an electronic entry system has been added (a buzzer underneath a microphone)  
Garage doors

No. 22: 21 flats under construction. The block is nearly finished.  
Posters of all sizes on the hoarding of the building site:  
At the Ranelagh: Buster Keaton  
At the Porte de Saint-Cloud: *L'Homme sauvage*.  
Auteuil-bon-Cinéma: *L'évasion la plus longue*  
Royal-Passy: *Guns for San Sebastian*  
Styx: *Two faces of Dr Jekyll*  
The Avignon Festival  
Etoile cinema: three masterpieces by Méliès and *The Most Dangerous Game*

COMINGS AND GOINGS IN RUE DE L'ASSOMPTION (cont.)

The Summer Festival of Paris (uninspiring programme)  
Viniprix flyers etc. (I'm sick of noting them all down)

No. 18: on the fifth floor, orange shutters; on the 6th floor, hanging gardens  
(the flat where Martine Carol used to live)

Nothing has changed at nos. 14 and 16, where Bernard Jaulin still lives.  
On the odd-numbered side, the convent has lost none of its charm, nor the  
garden its splendour.

After no. 14, there is a post-box, which I had completely forgotten; then a  
wholly undistinguished series of apartment blocks. At no. 4, Fontix,  
painters and decorators. \*

No. 5: a four-room flat to let on the first floor

No. 3: G. Francis, Café (formerly also a coal-merchants?); the frontage has  
recently been repainted in ochre

No. 1: The Paris Dairy  
Lingerie Corsets

On the corner of rue de la Fontaine: delicatessen.

No. 2: Bar-Brasserie-Restaurant. I wouldn't have minded going in for a  
coffee, but the establishment is closed from 29 June to 31 July.

2. Tuesday 3 November 1970, 11.30am.

The odd-numbered corner: Charcuterie, cooked meals  
Caterers  
Delicatessen-cooked dishes-roast meats

The even-numbered corner: 'Le Raynouard'  
Restaurant-Brasserie  
ANCRE BIERE D'ALSACE

It's market day in rue La Fontaine. Road repairs the whole length of rue de  
Boulainvilliers.

No. 1: Lingerie-Corsets-Bras  
The Paris (dairy), the mirror in the shop front of which is being  
replaced (SCB Glaziers)

No. 3: Thomas, tailors  
G. Francis, café-bar

No. 4B: Fontix Bros. Painters and Decorators  
The building between 4B and 6 juts out into the street. On the wall,  
a Lorin Publicity poster: the policeman on his beat. 'Occident'  
graffiti.

No. 7: A small private house. It is difficult to tell whether it is being done up or demolished

No. 9 onwards, the convent (of the Ladies of the Assumption?): marvellous autumnal trees.

No. 8: M and M<sup>me</sup> Smith, the parents of one of my classmates at the local primary school in rue des Bauches, still live here on the second floor.

Here and there, small cyclo-styled adverts

603 08 71

STORAGE

CUPBOARDS TO YOUR

SPECIFICATIONS

603 08 71

Nos. 14-16: in the courtyard there is a large piece of machinery that looks like a compressor

No. 15: A nun is shaking a duster out of the window

The sky is grey and full of rapidly moving clouds. Two yellow Printemps delivery vans drive past, bearing a slogan: At Printemps I can shop with my eyes closed.

No. 18<sup>1</sup>: hanging gardens

No. 20: an old detached house built in buhrstone. It is overlooked by a new apartment block: Lock-ups to let, Attic rooms to let (they are all gone: that line is crossed through), Flats for sale.

Nos. 24, 24B, 26, 28, detached houses with leafless trees.

No. 32: Dr Clin, E.N.T.; Dr F. Clin, Analysis

No. 34: Commemorative plaque for Marietta Martin

Lycée Molière. On the wall of the lycée there is a G.A.R. symbol, now almost completely rubbed out, and the inscription

ALL STATES ARE POLICE STATES

with a circle around the A of STATES (Anarchy)

No. 27: Ladies and Gentlemen's tailors

Laundry

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<sup>1</sup> The block of flats at no. 18 is where my aunt and uncle used to live, and where I myself lived, on and off (being a boarder during term time at the Collège Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire in Etampes from 1946 to 1956).

COMINGS AND GOINGS IN RUE DE L'ASSOMPTION (cont.)

Between nos. 40 and 46, in order:

The Lycée bookshop  
Georgia (lease for sale)  
Hairdresser's  
Jean-Michel delicatessen  
Antiques  
Fish and seafood

On the corner of rue Davioud, a chemist's.

No. 50: A business? Insurance?

Opposite, on the odd-numbered side:

Upholsterer's  
Grocer's  
Hardware shop  
Coignet, horse butcher's  
Dry-cleaner's  
'Mozart 59' bar

On the even-numbered side:

52: detached house with garden  
54: G. Thébault, Assumption Butchers  
56: Ranelagh Hotel  
Mozart opticians

Shoe shop (on the corner of avenue Mozart)

On the other side of avenue Mozart, the Jouen Bakery

62: Hairdresser's  
Dry-cleaner's (on the corner of avenue des Chalets)  
66: a small, new block of flats (where the 'Le Caméra' cinema used to stand)  
68: a new block: smoked-glass balconies, flowers  
70: a quaint old block of flats sandwiched between the two new ones  
78: a house built in 1900  
80: a house built in 1935  
67: a quaint old block of flats  
Cabinet maker's  
69-73: 'La Source de l'Auteuil', a new housing complex:  
For sale, very fine 5 rm flat with view of Gardens  
82: 'Le flambeau d'argent'  
84: Vilers Enterprises: Transactions, Property

At no. 81 there used to be a bookshop-stationers that has now disappeared,

but whose sign is still visible.  
On the corner of rue du Docteur-Blanche, a laundry-dry-cleaners  
87: An art-nouveau house

3. Friday 31 December 1971, about 1.00pm

It's market day in rue La Fontaine. A queue outside the charcuterie.  
A large sign on the façade of no. 4B:

Available shortly  
Studio flats 2, 3, 4 room flats  
To buyer's specifications  
Split-level

Between nos. 4 and 6, posters: Bardot, *Les Pétroleuses*  
and

The lives of 200,000 Pakistani children are in your hands (I noted down:  
200,000 children... I think I left off a zero and that it was actually  
2,000,000 children).

No. 7: a small house undergoing partial renovation. The iron railings are  
rusted. In the grounds, the trees are leafless.

There are piles of rubble stone, and sacks of plaster etc. in front of  
no. 18. There is a light showing in one of the windows on the third floor (one  
of the windows corresponding to my aunt and uncle's large living room)

No. 22: an ugly, new, expensive block. Flat for sale.

Not many people in the streets.

Nothing of note

The shops are closing.

No. 50 is an estate agent's

Over the road, no. 33 is a shop called 'Esthétique' (dog grooming etc.)

General impression?

(rue de l'Assomption bores me shitless)

A beautiful girl at the wheel of a Morris.

4. Monday 15 May 1972, about 12.30pm.

(after having been to visit my aunt who was living at that time in boulevard  
Beauséjour)

Girls coming out of the lycée  
85: Assumption laundry and dry-cleaner's

COMINGS AND GOINGS IN RUE DE L'ASSOMPTION (cont.)

82: Estate agent's  
Gold and Silver. Jewellery.  
65: Parking spaces for sale  
62: Dry-cleaner's  
Ladies' hairstylist  
60: Baker's  
59: 'Mozart 59' bar  
58: Nano shoes  
Mozart opticians  
56: Ranelagh Hotel  
54: Assomption Butchers  
33: Dry-cleaner's - horse butcher's - hardware shop  
Esthétique Hien - upholsterer's  
50: Estate agent's  
Chemist's  
48: 'L'océan'  
Furnished flats  
46: Antiques  
44: Jean-Michel delicatessen  
Hairdresser's  
40: Bookshop  
The Lycée Molière  
27: Laundry  
Tailor's

There are purple flowers behind the railings of the lycée  
The street is empty

32: F. Clin and E. Dama, Medical Analysis Laboratory  
22: FOR SALE: 4 room flat on 1st floor  
2 room flat on 2nd floor (right)

The block numbered 20C, 20B and 20 is having a face lift  
A packet of Craven A cigarettes has been impaled on the railings of no. 16  
There are some red flowers in front of the little house at no. 11  
No. 7 is deserted

There is a hole where 4B used to be

AVAILABLE SHORTLY  
2,3,4 ROOM FLATS  
TO BUYER'S SPECIFICATIONS

3:           Café-bar  
Tailor's  
The dairy  
Lingerie  
Charcuterie  
2:           Bar-restaurant  
-

5. 17 April 1973 about midday

Overcast and mild

1:           Delicatessen-cooked dishes-roast meats  
Lingerie-Corsets-Bras  
The Paris Dairy  
3:           Tailor's  
Café-bar, closed due to bereavement  
2:           Branch of the 'Société Générale' Bank

Between nos. 4 and 6 there is a building site with a big orange Potain crane  
and a blue cement-mixing lorry

Two advertising signs: Gas Central Heating

The site is still just a hole

On the façade of no. 6 there is some 'Occident' graffiti (a Celtic cross)

At nos. 7-9 a detached house that appears to be abandoned, with rusted iron  
gates held closed by chains

11:          an inhabited detached house

then the grounds of the sisters, with trees of a soft green

Tattered election posters on the lamp-posts

The gate to the convent grounds is ajar and affords a glimpse of some distant  
greenery

18:          the windows on the third floor are closed

20C:         the two private town houses appear to have had a face-lift. The one  
on the left is for sale (tel. 551 47 41)

the occasional car

22:         a modern block: 4 rm flats and domestics' quarters for sale

A small poster: down with leftist agitation

Four chestnut trees, heavy with leaf

Numerous cracks are visible in the façade of the block of flats on the corner

COMINGS AND GOINGS IN RUE DE L'ASSOMPTION (cont.)

of avenue Milleret-de-Brou, they are marked by small squares of plaster bearing the date: 15.11.72 (the block is quite recent)

27: Tailor's  
Laundry (which appears to be definitively closed)

'Occident' symbols

No. 40, bookshop; no. 44, hairdresser's and Jean-Michel delicatessen; no. 46, antiques; no. 48, a shop that has been gutted; no. 50, on the other side of rue Davioud, a chemist's and an estate agent's; no. 52, a detached house; no. 54, a butcher's; no. 56, Ranelagh Hotel; no. 58, Mozart opticians and a shoe shop on the corner of avenue Mozart.

No. 33, an upholsterer's, EsthétiqueHien, a hardware shop; no. 35, horse butcher's, dry-cleaner's, at no. 59, 'Mozart 59' bar.

Continuing on the other side of avenue Mozart: no. 62, Jouen bakery, hairdresser's, CELPA: two offices protected by vertical strip-blinds; then a row of new blocks of flats; nos. 55-61: flats to let, garages available; no. 82, 'Le Flambeau d'Argent'; no. 84, Viler Enterprises, property.

71-73: a recently-built block. Sound of radios and a game of table-tennis.  
Near the pavement, there's a sort of leaflet rack full of flyers for a book by Jacques Souchère, Shark Island, published at the author's own expense. It appears to be the story of a property scandal.

75: a building site: 'La Résidence du Valois' Call Pierre Baton  
An advert for 'Super-Italie'

83: dry-cleaner's  
At no. 94 all the shutters are being repainted  
At no. 89 there are beds of tulips in front of the block.

6. 28 October 1974 (Monday) about 3pm.

I wanted to go and visit my aunt but she wasn't in; I learned a few days later that she'd been hospitalized again.

I walked down rue de l'Assomption. At the junction with rue du Docteur-Blanche, there is the Mozart nursing home. At the window on the second floor, I saw a young woman in a dressing-gown holding a bouquet of flowers still in their wrapping paper; a smiling woman, her visitor, was standing next to her. A little further on there is a brand-new block. It is called 'Les Résidences du Valois'. Still for sale: one studio flat, some individual rooms and a commercial space of 115 m<sup>2</sup>.

I bought the notebook (Rhodia no. 16, 4.10F) on which I wrote these notes in the stationer's and book shop opposite the RATP training centre, and I sat down to write in the 'Mozart 59' café on the corner of rue de l'Assomption and avenue Mozart. (I think it's the only café in the whole street, since the one that used to be at no. 2 turned into a bank; there might be one other, a tiny one, more a 'bougnat' than a café proper, at no. 5 or 7.) I ordered a bottle of Vichy water and an espresso (3.70F including service). A mouthful of coffee went down the wrong way and I came within a whisker of vomiting. It's fine. Cold. Sunny. From my seat, I can see a shoe shop, an opticians (Mozart Opticians, 58) and the Ranelagh Hotel at 56, with its three signs: one is diamond-shaped (satisfaction guaranteed), one is a blue octagon (Hôtel de Tourisme, H, one star, General Tourist Board approved) and one is rectangular, red and blue against a white background: INI recommended.

Even if I lean forward, I can't see the butchers that I know is at no. 54.

On avenue Mozart a 22 goes past on its way to l'Opéra.

On rue de l'Assomption a 52 goes past on its way to l'Opéra.

There are traffic lights at the junction of avenue Mozart and rue de l'Assomption.

People walking past, some cars. A man in a mackintosh and cap is looking in the window of the opticians.

RATP apprentices, all dressed in the same blue overalls emerge from the training centre and walk up rue de l'Assomption.

At about 3.45, I left the café and continued to take notes as I walked:

Odd-numbered side: dry-cleaner's, horse butcher's, hardware store, second-hand furniture, antiques and interior decoration

Even-numbered side: film production (no. 48), antiques, delicatessen, hairdresser's, the Lycée bookshop

Odd-numbered side: Ladies and Gentlemen's tailoring (no. 27)

No. 21: plaques mark the spot of recent cracks (15.11.72)

Anarchist symbols: a capital A in a circle

No. 22: a new block

No. 20: a hole

advertisements: The new Volvo

Seven years' reflexion

New at Rivoli: C&A

In this hole they are going to build 'Les Allées de Boulainvilliers' (14 flats; completion: Autumn 1975). Wallpaper, paint and mouldings are still

COMINGS AND GOINGS IN RUE DE L'ASSOMPTION (cont.)

visible on the wall of the adjacent block (no. 18)

No. 22: 4/5 rm flats for sale on 6th floor

At no. 18, the shutters on the third floor are closed

The trees in the grounds of the convent are still green. The gates to the grounds are open. An old Citroën with an already old registration plate (BD 75) (drives past).

On a wall opposite no. 12, a monarchist symbol.

Opposite no. 6, one of the two little detached houses has been demolished (the smaller of the two, which, I think, had long been abandoned); in its place there is a green hoarding on which is written (in spray-paint):

Brasillach, preceded by a rather badly drawn swastika.

The block at no. 5 was built by Gélis Didot in 1893.

Between 4 and 6, a brand-new block, one 3/4 rm flat, a split-level flat and a commercial space of 77m<sup>2</sup> with a stock room of 23m<sup>2</sup> are still available.

Posters: 27th Exhibition of the Child

Pleyel: Vichnevskaya Rostropovitch

Champs-Elysées: Henryk Szeryng

No. 3: café-bar closed, tailor's

No. 2: Société Générale bank

No. 1: Paris Dairy, Lingerie, Delicatessen, cooked dishes

I stop at the 'Boulainvilliers' café. It is 4.15. My hands are cold.

7. 11 March 1975, about 11.30am.

The road is one-way (from the bottom to the top)

There are traffic lights at the corner of rue de l'Assomption and rue de Boulainvilliers.

No. 2, Société Générale bank; no. 1, delicatessen, cooked dishes, lingerie, the Paris Dairy; no. 3, a tailor's, a café-bar (closed). A Rolls-Royce is parked at the end of the street. Another Rolls drives past. On the site of 4 or 4B there is a block of flats. The pavement, which encroaches slightly into the road, is bordered here with metal stakes. There are still some flats and commercial premises for sale. Advertising posters (Lorin Publicity) for Maxime Le Forrestier at the Palais des Congrès and for the International Festival of Sound. Six small posters for the Esmeralda Saloon.

There is a green hoarding across the front of no. 7. The house has been demolished. On the hoarding, the programme of the 'Les 3 Murats' cinema:

Thomas

Scènes de la vie conjugale

Le jeu avec le feu

Posters for 'Fiesta' by Francis Lopez and for a recital of the complete violin and harpsichord suites by Bach.

Graffiti on the wall of the convent: Long live the king, and a fleur-de-lys.

No. 20 is one big building site (the 'Allées de Boulaivilliers' development).

Adverts for public lectures on Greece, Turkey, India and Nepal.

At no. 22 there is a 4/5 room flat for sale on the 6th floor.

At no. 24 chestnut trees just starting to come into leaf, a large Aucuba.

On the wall of the flats at no. 21 there is a piece of graffiti: I'll fuck you up the arse Muriel. Between 28 and 30, a road sign on which is written

P

Lorry Park

Pont de Grenelle

At no. 27, a tailor's shop (opens at 2.00pm). The architrave has been repainted in red lead paint.

At no. 40, the Lycée bookshop; Christine hairstylist; 44: Jean-Michel delicatessen; 46: antiques; 48: GCA Films; 50: 'La Pastorale' record shop.

Over the road. At no. 33, upholsterer's; then: Pucelle second-hand furniture; hardware shop; horse butcher's; dry-cleaner's; 'Mozart 59' café.

No. 50: 'La Milodièr' estate agent's; 54: butcher's; 56: Hotel; 58: Optician's and shoe shop.

I turn into avenue Mozart to go and catch the Metro at Ranelagh station.





# Stances on Mabillon

Translated from the French by Andrew Leak



## STANCES ON MABILLON

Georges Perec

31 January 1969

6pm. In the 'Atrium' café, sitting outside, at the far end, on boulevard Saint-Germain.

Directly ahead of me, I can see the red sign of the 'Rhumerie Martiniquaise', my gaze follows an imaginary line almost perpendicular to rue de Buci and straight down boulevard Saint-Germain in the direction of Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

The café is almost full, night has fallen. The weather is fine. The sky is pale purple.

The traffic on the boulevard (one-way, coming towards me) is free-moving. A steady, slow-moving crowd on the pavements.

Opposite, at the junction of rue du Four and the boulevard, a BNP bank, dimly lit, on the ground floor of a grey building. Two windows are illuminated on the first floor, and two on the fourth.

A little further off, there is the characteristic sign of a café-tabac (the 'Saint-Claude'); I can vaguely make out the sheltered tables outside.

(Amongst the passers-by, I spot a woman friend I haven't seen for a long time, who nods to me, then continues on her way).

In the foreground, on the pavement, there are some metal stakes which, if they had their chains attached, would prevent anyone from crossing the boulevard at this point - or would at least make it more difficult.

Two posters for Grande Ecole balls on a tree in its wire cage (one of them has a photograph of Line and Willy; on the other one, a would-be psychedelic orange and mauve affair, the word 'Gear' can be seen).

Looking now at the pavement opposite:

The white building housing the Tourism Bookshop (Taride Maps).

A black building, the first-floor windows of which bear the initials L.D., and whose ground floor is concealed by a hoarding upon which there are three large posters: Barbara at L'Olympia (tall, in black, her hand raised); Inno BJ, announcing late opening twice a week (Wednesdays from 9.15am to 10pm, Fridays from 10am to 8.45pm) and Liebig Soup Hmm, as soon as you open it, it's... the remaining words and the whole of the bottom of the poster are covered by smaller yellow and green bills.

Lip's, tailors: on the first floor, a rail of suits.

A news-stand with a yellow awning bearing the words Paris-Presse.

Buci, tailors.  
then, on the other side, on rue de Buci:  
  
A leather-goods shop with Sale now on  
Men's Dress Hire  
Il Teatro  
'Au Cor de Chasse' men's dress hire  
'Le Mabillon' café, complete with its pancake-seller and an oyster stall,  
blue, closed.  
  
coming back on to the boulevard, beyond 'Le Mabillon' Café-Ices  
  
The sign of the 'Rhumerie'  
The Wimpy Bar of Jacques Borel  
another café beyond that.  
  
6.35pm. From 'Le Mabillon' café.  
  
Five police vans, their windows protected by wire mesh, having turned out  
of rue du Four, go past on boulevard Saint-Germain.  
  
In the foreground, a row of tables and chairs.  
  
Two small posters on a tree (without a wire cage), one of them concerning  
I don't want to die stupid at the Théâtre des Arts, the other inviting people  
to attend a Ceramics Evening on February 1st, in the exhibition room of the  
George V Hotel, entrance 20F, students 12F  
  
then the double-yellow line replacing the pedestrian crossing.  
  
In front of me:  
  
looking now toward Saint-Germain-des-Prés  
  
The sign of a tabac  
a shop with an oval sign that I can't quite read  
'La Gaminerie' children's wear  
two other shops, doubtless also devoted to clothing  
the BNP no more brightly lit than before  
rue du Four looks dark  
a shoe shop, TILL for Young Feet, with a sky-blue shopfront  
a poster representing, I think, very stylized birds  
'La Pergola' bar Tuborg Open all hours Snack B(ar) Restaurant (the A and

the R of BAR remaining hidden from me by the Metro sign, beneath a large yellowish globe)

The news-stand next to the exit of the Metro is just visible (but that's only because I know it's there).

Then the street (rue de Montfaucon) that leads to Saint-Germain Market. In the distance, a pizzeria (a red sign alternating with a blue one that I can't manage to read), a bar, signalled by two twinkling rectangular neon panels, another sign, a round one this time, spinning on its axis, an ELF logo, a white sign that appears deformed to me (an effect of anamorphosis) then, once more, the 'Atrium' café and the clock at the crossroads showing 6.50pm. The screen separating the lounge from the bar is made of frosted glass with coloured inserts, in a cubist style that must have been popular, I imagine, in about 1930. The same for the door leading to the Toilets/Telephone, which is surrounded by a gigantic photograph of the Ile de la Cité.

The coffee costs 1.50F (it was 1.35F at the 'Atrium').

7pm. 'Le Diderot'<sup>1</sup> café-tabac

It's a lot busier here, or at least a lot livelier.

I have taken a table inside, rather than outside; I can hardly make out the street.

Reflected in a mirror, I can see the sign of a Chinese restaurant that must actually be behind me (perhaps next door to 'Le Village' bar?)

I can also manage to see the sign of the Wimpy over the road, quite a long way off, and something that might be the 'Galerie du Siècle'; if I lean forward, and as long as there are no buses on the boulevard at that moment, I can even manage to see the sign of the 'Rhumerie'.

The traffic jams are starting.

I crossed the boulevard (coming from 'Le Mabillon' café) weaving between the cars, just before a fire engine or police car passed, sirens blaring to clear a path.

Most of the customers look familiar to me.

I'm drinking a Coca-Cola.

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<sup>1</sup> The café-tabac is actually called 'Le Saint-Claude', but I persist in calling it 'Le Diderot' because of the statue.

Monday 8 June 1970. Midnight. (on my way home to rue de Seine)

There are three busloads of mobile guards at the Mabillon crossroads. A few of them on the pavement near 'La Pergola', wearing forage caps, truncheons at their sides, appear to be having a laugh with some of their colleagues in civilian dress.

People sitting outside the cafés.

Hot. Thundery.

Images of the times.

Saturday 12 June 1971. About 3pm.

'L'Atrium' café.

A grey police van has just pulled up outside Lip's clothes shop. Women police officers have got out, clutching their pads of parking tickets.

Next door to Lip's, a black building in the process of being renovated, or demolished. On the hoarding that masks the ground floor there are three posters, one for La Maison sous les arbres (title hidden by a row of yellow portraits beneath which I think I can read the word 'Passionara'), the second for Taking Off, the third for On est toujours trop bon avec les femmes - title obscured by white and purple exclamation marks, which, I happen to know (because I saw it up close a moment ago) are on a poster calling on people to attend a public debate with Laurent Salini (PCF).

At the rue de Buci-boulevard Saint-Germain crossroads there is a pole, at the very top of which is a tricolour, and mounted about a third of the way up, a large board advertising the Rouault exhibition.

In the foreground, chains preventing you from crossing the boulevard. Little placards have been hung from them, advertising the review CREE 'the first French review of design, art and the contemporary environment'; the cover of the review represents a hoarding.

Free-moving traffic.

Not many people in the café.

Pale sunshine filtering through the clouds. Cool.

The people: alone, for the most part, and miserable looking. A few couples. Young mothers with their young children; some girls, in groups of two or three; the odd tourist. Long raincoats. A lot of (American) combat

jackets and shirts.

A newspaper kiosk over the road:

Motor racing: Le Mans

Romy Schneider charged!

Week-End: Photo finish!

(I've still got good eyes!)

Another van load of cops (the third since I got here)

A friend walks past, dragging his feet a little; I often meet him strolling around the streets like this.

(Sketch for a typology of walking? Most of the passers-by stroll or dawdle, don't seem to have a very clear idea where they are going).

A couple sitting at a table outside block my view.

It is starting to rain.

4-5 September 1972. 6.45pm.

I came from Julliard, then Nadeau's, by rue de Condé, rue des Quatre-Vents, Saint-Germain Market, rue Clément, rue? (de Montfaucon).

The weather is very fine, very mild. The pavement tables outside the café (the one I call the 'Aquarium', but which is actually called the 'Atrium') are full. Lots of people in the street. Neon signs already illuminated in rue du Four. The Taride building; on the first floor the letters L.D.; on the ground floor, hoardings bearing advertisements: Hush Puppies the shoes that love life; wool is more real than ever (a shepherd wearing a beret and carrying a tiny lamb); the shop next door is called Lip's (a clothes shop probably); in front of me, a white pole flying a tricolour with, on its lower third, a poster for the Georges de la Tour exhibition at the Orangerie. Then the shop, Buci. Ahead of me, on rue de Buci: 'Le Mabillon' café, 'Au Cor de Chasse' Men's dress hire, Il Teatro, Jean-Jacques Dress hire; some shops I cannot make out, partially hidden from view by a news-stand with a yellow, green, pink and blue parasol, the flaps of which bear the inscription FRANCE-SOIR. Still lots of people. The beauty of the women, sometimes, often. Over the road, the usual bloody Hari Krishnas, or their look-alikes, parading along, clapping their hands. A green, English-style lorry is causing a minor traffic jam. Horns. A yellow Post Office van. 63 bus. On the other side, over towards rue du Four, opposite the BNP bank, Darras and Jouanin have been

contracted to undertake roadworks. A huge yellow van, Eurovan Removals. In front of me, to my left, a pole and poster for Sicob 'Knowledge is power', with an illustration by Folon (I think). In front of me, to the right, next to the Taride building, there's a shop - another fashion boutique; it is called Tac O Tac. A little further, Editions Mazdéennes publishers and the Old Navy. On boulevard Saint-Germain, to my left: trees, and beyond the trees, above them, the slate steeple of the church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. 86 bus. The same threesome walks back past, one of whom is a woman dressed entirely in green leatherette. A black SNCF van. A siren somewhere: it comes closer and passes: Electricity emergency service (the sliding side door of the van was open, and what I actually read was Electricemergency or Electricitergency). Kids on bikes. Taxis. A yellow and blue Friteau Removals van (Armor).

HELLO S.O.S. 99 Breakdowns. A Post Office scooter. In front of the café: a fire alarm and a clock. 7.06pm. A little further: a Metro station; the yellow 'France-Soir' canvas of a news-stand. 'La Pergola' bar. In rue du Four, to the right, the red circle and green cross with a snake curling round it of a chemist's, and a neon circle 'Gavroche' (?) filling up with yellow ochre dots. Boulevard Saint-Germain: opposite, 'Le Mabillon', Adelshofen beer, the 'Rhumerie Martiniquaise' (yellow ochre awning with brown stripes). Further away, a pizzeria (?) and Chicago (clothes shop?). 70 bus. 86 bus. Some faces eventually come to seem familiar, perhaps because they keep passing back and forth. No let-up in the crowd, nor in the flow of cars. There are chains stopping you from crossing the boulevard. An S.O.S. 99 breakdown truck. 96 bus. There's a small poster for Mrozek's 'Strip-Tease' hung on the base of the clock. A Jancarthier removals van. A lilac-coloured Sodifroid delivery van. A yellow car. 63 bus. 86 bus. Mums choose Natalys. Boulevard Saint-Germain, to my left, one can make out the neon sign of a tabac (the 'Saint-Claude'). There is a woman playing the violin at the door of the café, a few metres away, audible only in brief, unrecognizable snatches (even if she were to come closer). J.L., bearded, arrives on his black motor bike.

23 December 1974. 3.15pm.

'L'Aérium' (sic) café.

Incredibly blue sky.

Work is still continuing on the 'Taride' building. The ground floor is covered by a hoarding upon which there are three large posters: Entre chien

et loup (romantic mountains at dusk; the distant silhouette of Mr Sandeman); Le Retour du grand blond (an Yves Robert film starring Pierre Richard: on the poster, the latter is 'playing the violin' on a big red shoe); The Man with the Golden Gun (the latest James Bond). Above them, two banner posters: Hermann publishers (Arts and Sciences) has moved (to 293, rue Lecourbe), and the building, comprising a large business unit, basement, offices and flat - partially free - is for sale as a single lot.

In the building next door (to its right, for me: closer to L'Odéon), the Tac O Tac boutique is having a 'Clearance sale. Closure for refurbishment'. Further on, Editions Mazdéennes and the Old Navy, a perfume shop, 'Le Mandarin' café, a fashion boutique.

To its left, two tailor's: Lip's and Buci.

In rue de Buci: produce of the Auvergne, Gérard Gil (tailor), Jean-Jacques (Dress hire), Il Teatro, 'Au Cor de Chasse' (Dress hire), 'Le Mabillon' café. Then boulevard Saint-Germain, the 'Rhumerie', Verdi Pizzeria, Chicago (fashion), M.G.B. fashion. Two signs of the Paris Tourist Office (huge posters fixed to poles): one of them opposite the Buci shop: neo-classical drawings from the provincial museums; the other opposite the café (next to the clock: Le Jeu de Daniel, with Claude Piéplu and the Ensemble Polyphonique of the O.R.T.F. at the Church of Saint-Germain).

Next to the first pole, a news kiosk (seen from behind) with small posters expressing concerns over the exile of Princess Grace, announcing Madame Soleil's famous predictions for 1975, underlining the fact that Spécial gave the correct 1-2-3 and that Week-end correctly forecast three tiercés out of four.

Lots of pedestrians.



# *After All*

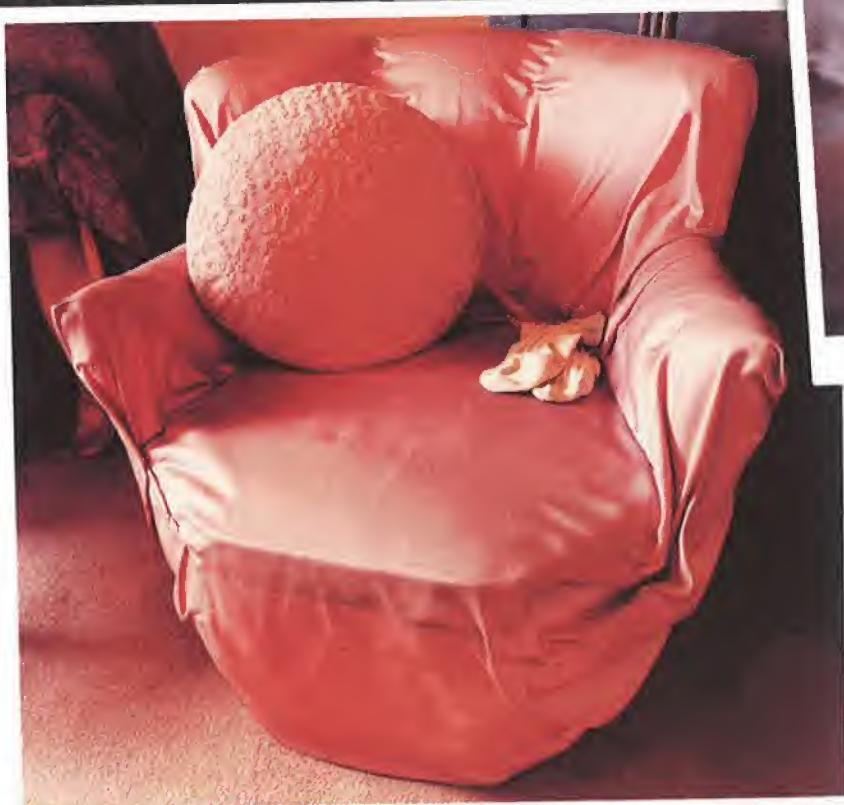
*'Photographs by' Jason Oddy*

I have, I think, set the date. Or perhaps it was from the first set for me. At least I have been preparing for this day to come for a long time. Probably since the beginning. And now I am growing impatient. All around I can feel my things watching me. They look tired and worn out. I think they know more than I do.

Some say it is an exact science, this winding down of life. From the moment the sperm knocks against the egg, time starts and time begins to run out. Each beat of the heart like the tick of a second hand on a giant clock twitching towards zero, though a bus or a bullet might do just as well. Yet fate decreed I should live out my days, and when I die it will come as no surprise. The world will not pause, not even for a second. Perhaps if I had gone before my time a few tears would have been shed. Now I will be lucky if only my things emit a terminal sigh. And this mainly to signal their end as well.

Gradually I have grown to be like my things. There are days for instance when I can no longer tell where I end and where my sofa begins. Weeks, possibly months go by when it seems as though I do not leave it at all. Oh sometimes of course, though not always, to pass a little water or squeeze out a little dry fundament. And for sustenance too – my smokes and the odd spoonful of something that does not take too much trouble to force into my cracked old hole. But most of the time me and my sofa – my sofa and I – are as one.

Our place is in front of the telly. For even if I can no longer really see, no more than vague shapes and colours, I want to be near. Sometimes I put my glasses on, but only really as a way of helping me remember those days when, only halfway blind, I could still recognize the occasional form. Nothing living mind you, though from time to time I used to

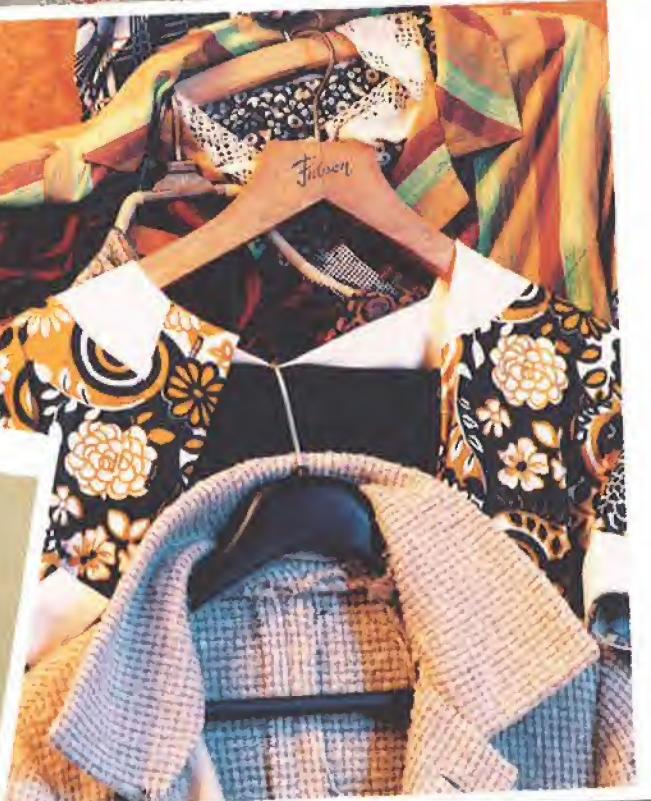






*Fubson*





Electricity prices  
fall again

catch sight of George's shadow. George, who brings me what I need to live. George, without whom I would no longer know what it is to be human.

Maybe sitting where I do helps me hear better, but I'm not sure. Nowadays everything seems muffled and pressing what I think is the volume button doesn't make much difference. Sometimes though, I sit with it off. I know it's off because all around me is a stillness that reminds me of another time, a time, maybe, before I was cast screaming into this world. What comfort to realize that soon I will be returning to that place which the silence and inertia of my things foreshadow. Oh some of them are yet possessed of a little life for sure. From time to time my shoes still shuffle around at the end of my legs. My handbag snaps itself open and closed – George must be paid after all. But apart from these desultory spasms they have given up their claim on living. They have given up the game of being. They have turned in on themselves in preparation for eternity.

It's funny then to think that after I go, once I have disappeared (although in my silence and my solitude have I not already done so?) all that will remain of me will be my things. In them I shall appear, though to whom I do not know. They, whose decrepitude has for so long been the mirror of my own end, will serve as the solitary memorial to my existence. Scattered memories, old habits, particular tastes. I think I should prefer it if it were not so.

My husband Albert, yes I think that was his name, died within a week of us getting married. And since then nothing has changed in the flat we shared so briefly. For a while after his death I went to work as a dressmaker, or was it a shop assistant? No matter. Because even then the world outside meant little to me. Oh I went









through the motions, the motions of living, for sure. I mean you had to. But the moment I stopped working, the moment that is I could tell the world to go to hell, I gathered in those bits of me still hanging in the air, and shut myself away for good.

It's quite something to disappear. At first others lose sight of you. Then you fancy that you begin to lose sight of yourself. Yet no matter how hard you try, of course you never do. Even so there are moments when, with no one to remind you you exist, you are no longer aware who you are, or even that you are. But after a time you always come to – at first imperceptibly and, before you can stop it, your inner voice begins again. Sometimes though, just sometimes, you catch a glimpse of nothing. And then you get to see what it's like. The end I mean. Your end. My end. It is somewhere I know I belong.

I can't say quite when it happened, but one day I woke to find that my things – or rather the things – I felt then that I could no longer call them mine – had taken over. Piles and piles of them now occupy the space I once considered my own. On the rare occasion when I must move, I find my way barred by the myriad objects that have vomited themselves over every least corner of my home. If once they helped me, if they told me – when I forgot – who I was, and kept me anchored to a life which I must soon leave behind, now they have become a terrifying, incontinent incarnation of all that sustained me for so long. They have turned on me and are chasing me out of this world. Through my weeping cataracts, I look at them. And they, eyeless, watch me. In this game of blind man's bluff, no one blinks.

Photographs courtesy of The Photographers' Gallery, London.

# The Bartlebooth Follies

*Paul Auster*

Georges Perec died in 1982 at the age of forty-six, leaving behind a dozen books and a brilliant reputation. In the words of Italo Calvino, he was ‘one of the most singular literary personalities in the world, a writer who resembled absolutely no one else’. It has taken a while for us to catch on, but now that his major work has at last been translated into English – *Life A User’s Manual* (1978) – it will be impossible for us to think of contemporary French writing in the same way again.

Born into a Jewish family from Poland that emigrated to France in the 1920s, Perec lost his father in the German invasion of 1940 and his mother to the concentration camps in 1943. ‘I have no memories of childhood,’ he would later write. His literary career began early, and by the age of nineteen he was already publishing critical notes in the *NRF* and *Les Lettres Nouvelles*. His first novel, *Les Choses*, was awarded the Prix Renaudot for 1965, and from then until his death he published approximately one book a year.

Given his tragic family history, it is perhaps surprising to learn that Perec was essentially a comic writer. For the last fifteen years of his life, in fact, he was an active member of Oulipo, a strange literary society founded by Raymond Queneau and the mathematician Francois le Lionnais. This Workshop for Potential Literature (*Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*) proposes all kinds of madcap operations to writers: the S-7 method (rewriting famous poems by replacing each word with the seventh word that follows it in the dictionary), the Lipogram (eliminating the use of one or more letters in a text), acrostics, palindromes, permutations, anagrams, and numerous other ‘literary constraints’. As one of the leading lights of this group, Perec once wrote an entire novel of more than 200 pages without using the letter ‘e’; this novel was followed by another in which ‘e’ is the only vowel that appears. Verbal gymnastics of this sort seemed to come naturally to him. In addition to his literary work, he produced a notoriously difficult weekly crossword puzzle for the news magazine *Le Point*.

To read Georges Perec one must be ready to abandon oneself to a spirit of play. His books are studded with intellectual traps, allusions and secret systems, and if they are not necessarily profound (in the sense that Tolstoy and Mann are profound), they

are prodigiously entertaining (in the sense that Lewis Carroll and Laurence Sterne are entertaining). In Chapter Two of ‘Life’, for example, Perec refers to ‘the score of a famous American melody, “Gertrude of Wyoming”, by Arthur Stanley Jefferson’. By pure chance, I happened to know that Arthur Stanley Jefferson was the real name of the comedian Stan Laurel, but just because I caught this allusion does not mean there weren’t a thousand others that escaped me.

For the mathematically inclined, there are magic squares and chess moves to be discovered in this novel, but the fact that I was unable to find them did not diminish my enjoyment of the book. Those who have read a great deal will no doubt recognize passages that quote directly or indirectly from other writers – Kafka, Agatha Christie, Melville, Freud, Rabelais, Nabokov, Jules Verne and a host of others – but failure to recognize them should not be considered a handicap. Like Jorge Luis Borges, Georges Perec had a mind that was a storehouse of curious bits of knowledge and awesome erudition, and half the time the reader can’t be sure if he is being conned or enlightened. In the long run, it probably doesn’t matter. What draws one into this book is not Perec’s cleverness, but the deftness and clarity of his style, a flow of language that manages to sustain one’s interest through endless lists, catalogues, and descriptions. Perec had an uncanny gift for articulating the nuances of the material world, and in his hands even a worm-eaten table can become an object of fascination. ‘It was after he had done this that he thought of dissolving what was left of the original wood so as to disclose the fabulous aborescence within, this exact record of the worms’ life inside the wooden mass: a static, mineral accumulation of all the movements that had constituted their blind existence, their undeviating single-mindedness, their obstinate itineraries; the faithful materialization of all they had eaten and digested as they forced from their dense surroundings the invisible elements needed for their survival, the explicit, visible, immeasurably disturbing image of the endless progressions that had reduced the hardest of woods to an impalpable network of crumbling galleries.’

*Life A User’s Manual* is constructed in the manner of a vast jigsaw puzzle. Perec takes a single apartment building in Paris

and in ninety-nine short chapters (along with a Preamble and an Epilogue) proceeds to give a meticulous description of each and every room as well as the life stories of all the inhabitants, both past and present. Ostensibly, we are watching the creation of a painting by Serge Valène, an old artist who has lived in the building for fifty-five years. 'It was in the final months of his life that the artist Serge Valène conceived the idea of a painting that would reassemble his entire existence: everything his memory had recorded, all the sensations that had swept over him, all his fantasies, his passions, his hates would be recorded on canvas, a compendium of minute parts of which the sum would be his life.'

What emerges is a series of self-contained but interconnecting stories. They are all briskly told, and they run the gamut from the bizarre to the realistic. There are tales of murder and revenge, tales of intellectual obsessions, humorous tales of social satire, and (almost unexpectedly) a number of stories of great psychological penetration. For the most part, Perec's microcosm is peopled with a motley assortment of oddballs, impassioned collectors, antiquarians, miniaturists, and half-baked scholars. If anyone can be called the central character in this shifting, kaleidoscopic work, it would have to be Percival Bartlebooth, an eccentric English millionaire whose insane and useless fifty-year project serves as an emblem for the book as a whole. Realizing as a young man that his wealth has doomed him to a life of boredom, he undertakes to study the art of watercolour from Serge Valène for a period of ten years. Although he has no aptitude whatsoever for painting, he eventually reaches a satisfactory level of competence. Then, in the company of a servant, he sets out on a twenty-year voyage around the world with the sole intention of painting watercolours of five hundred different harbours and seaports. As soon as one of these pictures is finished, he sends it to a man in Paris by the name of Gaspard Winckler, who also lives in the building. Winckler is an expert puzzle-maker whom Bartlebooth has hired to turn the watercolours into 750-piece jigsaw puzzles. One by one, the puzzles are made over the twenty-year period and stored in wooden boxes. Bartlebooth returns from his travels, settles back into his apartment, and methodically goes about putting the puzzles together in

chronological order. By means of an elaborate chemical process that has been designed for the purpose at hand, the borders of the puzzle pieces are glued together in such a way that the seams are no longer visible, thus restoring the watercolour to its original integrity. The watercolour, good as new, is then removed from its wooden backing and sent back to the place where it was executed twenty years earlier. There, by rearrangement, it is dipped into a detergent solution that eliminates all traces of the painting, leaving Bartlebooth with a clean and unmarked sheet of paper. In other words, he is left with nothing, the same thing he started with. The project, however, does not quite go according to plan. Winckler has made the puzzles too difficult, and Bartlebooth does not live long enough to finish all five hundred of them. As Perec writes in the last paragraph of the ninety-ninth chapter: 'It is the twenty-third of June nineteen hundred and seventy-five, and it is eight o'clock in the evening. Seated at his jigsaw puzzle, Bartlebooth has just died. On the tablecloth, somewhere in the crepuscular sky of the four hundred and thirty-ninth puzzle, the black hole of the sole piece not yet filled in has the almost perfect shape of an X. But the ironical thing, which could have been foreseen long ago, is that the piece the dead man holds between his fingers is shaped like a W.'

Like many of the other stores in *Life* Bartlebooth's weird saga can be read as a parable (of sorts) about the efforts of the human mind to impose an arbitrary order on the world. Again and again, Perec's characters are swindled, hoaxed, and thwarted in their schemes, and if there is a darker side to this book, it is perhaps to be found in this emphasis on the inevitability of failure. Even a self-annihilating project such as Bartlebooth's cannot be completed, and when we learn in the Epilogue that Valène's enormous painting (which for all intents and purposes is the book we have just been reading) has come no farther than a preliminary sketch, we realize that Perec does not exempt himself from the follies of his characters. It is this sense of self-mockery that turns a potentially daunting novel into a hospitable work, a book that for all its high-jinx and japery finally wins us over with the warmth of its human understanding.

HOME OF TRUTH IN PACKAGING THE ECONOMY

此句雖與前句有重複之嫌，但亦可謂之對偶。

IN PACKAGING TRUTH IN PACKAGING THE EP

## OF TRUTH IN PACKAGING THE EPITOME OF TRUTH IN GIVING THE EPITOME OF TRUTH IN PACKAGING THE EPITOME OF TRUTH IN

The image shows a repeating pattern of a book cover. The book has a light beige or cream-colored cover with a subtle woven texture. The title 'THE EPITOME OF TRUTH IN PACKAGING' is printed in a dark, serif font along the top edge. A thick, diagonal red ribbon or banner is overlaid across the book, containing the text 'AFFORDABLE HIGHLY DESIRABLE EXTREMELY AFFORDABLE HIGHLY DESIRABLE'. The background features a large, faint watermark of the same book cover.

# From Lieux to Life...

Tom Emerson

This is how space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page. To describe it: to name it, to trace it, like those portolano-makers who saturated the coastlines with the names of harbours, the names of capes, the names of inlets, until in the end the land was only separated from the sea by a continuous ribbon of text. Is the aleph, that place in Borges from which the entire world is visible simultaneously, anything other than an alphabet?<sup>1</sup>

My trajectory through the treatment of space in Perec's writing examines the termination of *Lieux* and the emergence of Bartlebooth, the central character in his epic novel *Life A User's Manual* (1978). The transition from *Lieux* to *Life* is not simply the abandonment of the discipline imposed by Perec's 12-year personal planner in favour of the freedoms of fiction; more significantly, it is a move away from the recollection of a single life across the spaces of the city and towards the representation of the world through the interior of a Parisian building.

Although the publication of *Species of Spaces* (1974) marked the beginning of Georges Perec's explicit concern with seeing and describing spaces and things, he had been developing his attitudes towards an 'anthropology of everyday life' for some time.<sup>2</sup> The spatial structure of events and the people that inhabit them had been a key part of his fiction since the earliest novels of the mid 1960s. Characters in his writings are often built from out of the world that surrounds them. Frequently this is Paris. In *Things* (1965) the accumulation and display of objects in the city comes to define the futile desires of Jerome and Sylvie. The novel chooses the young couple and their environment as the subjects of a quasi-scientific sociological study of the pitfalls of consumer society. And if, on the one hand, the couple define themselves through things, it only proves, on the other, that it is things that define them.

The narrative progresses flatly, describing the objects they possess and those they desire. In such works, Perec concentrates on the description of details that are usually ignored or taken for granted: gestures involved in parking a car or the manner in which people hold their newspapers. In *A Man Asleep* (1967), the story of a disenchanted student withdrawing from social life, Perec uses a similar descriptive technique but here he intensifies the level of detail, building slow and meticulous descriptions of the character's bedroom and the public spaces of his aimless walks. Whether it is in his short exercises of remembering or his first epic project – the survey of Paris in *Lieux* – Perec's anthropological and autobiographical texts are structured and described in space.

Yet Perec's spaces, whether real or imaginary, are not stable worlds from which the writer can create stories of dizzying complexity. While space, to Perec, is the armature of experience, it remains fragile and ephemeral. As a result, a meticulous attention to the physical world is necessary in order to create character and, more importantly, to preserve it from erasure and disappearance. If Perec is so concerned that his characters are constructed by spaces and things, it is because the characters, in themselves, are incapable of remembrance. Space is the locus of memory (and history) and it must, therefore, be protected in order to prevent erasure. It must be described so that it may survive.

Space melts like sand running through one's fingers. Time bears it away and leaves me only shapeless shreds...

To write: to try meticulously to retain something, to cause something to survive: to wrest some precise scraps from the void as it grows, to leave somewhere a furrow, a trace, a mark or a few signs.<sup>3</sup>

*Species of Spaces*, 'a journal by a user of space' in the style of Lewis Carroll, is curious, questioning, funny and disturbing. The book is structured like a set of Russian dolls, each chapter encased within the next – the Page, the Bed, the Bedroom, the Apartment, the Apartment Building, the Street, the Neighbourhood, the Town, the Countryside, the Country, Europe, the World and Space – to suggest the progressive appropriation of space. Between the page and the world, space is claimed in which to live.

Within this journey from micro to macro, Perec announces a series of projects, exercises in perception and description, that introduce, for the first time, enumeration or lists as an alternative to realist description. The first project, 'Lieux où j'ai dormi', proposes to describe all the places where he has slept (and Perec claimed to remember all of them, except those of his earliest infancy). Consequently although the texts are presented as accounts of real, observed phenomena, autobiography is their primary motive, and, being based on remembered observation, they are twice translated – by perception and by memory – before they arrive as text on page.

Further on in the book, Perec attempts to develop a new simultaneous descriptive technique called 'Travaux pratiques', in which he attempts to merge the observation and description of a Parisian place into a single act. As he sits and describes what he sees from a café table, it is evident that the obstacles to seeing distinctly (a collective and personal deficiency) still anguish Perec: 'what we call quotidian is not clear, but opacity: a form of

blindness, a form of anaesthesia'.<sup>4</sup> He proposes a method to exit this insensitivity: all preconceived ideas must be expelled; nothing should be taken for granted. Perec interrogates his space, establishing elementary distinctions: 'You must set about it more slowly, almost stupidly. Force yourself to write down what is of no interest, what is most obvious, most common, most colourless'.<sup>5</sup> While this attitude evokes the behaviour of the disengaged protagonist of *A Man Asleep*, the similarity is superficial and misleading. Whereas *A Man Asleep* was an examination of 'nothingness', the new project attempts to engage the viewer and his writing with the space under observation, amassing and writing detail which, in aggregate, will embody that quotidian space. The most important aspect of the project is the simultaneity of perception and representation. Perec explains his new methods in relation to a project begun five years earlier, in 1969: *Lieux*.<sup>6</sup>

*Lieux* unites three of Perec's principal concerns: the sociology of everyday spaces, autobiography and experimental poetics. The simultaneous descriptions permitted and forced him to go into the city's spaces, looking, seeing, observing and writing, all within the same act. Both he and the place are physically present on each occasion, giving him the opportunity to interrogate the space within the description. Ultimately, Perec would appropriate the places by a slow and repeated immersion within them, noting everything.

When, in 1975, Perec renounced writing *Lieux*, it was in no way a failure, but, as Philippe Lejeune demonstrates in his exhaustive genetic study of the project, it was a renaissance, a liberation.<sup>7</sup> Perec immediately began writing *Life A User's Manual*, which had been slowly maturing for years.<sup>8</sup>

*Life A User's Manual* describes a Parisian building, removing the façade to leave every room and every resident (past and present) simultaneously visible, from the ground floor to the garret. The building is ten storeys high and ten rooms wide, suggesting an expanded chessboard. Each room corresponds to a chapter. The order in which the chapters are sequenced is determined by the knight's tour, a system for moving the knight around a chessboard so that it alights on every square once and not more than once. For Perec it regulates a non-linear yet not arbitrary spatial progression through the building. He then goes on to regulate the elements to be described in each room: inventories of objects, characters, actions, and allusions to other texts. The source material for each chapter comes, largely, from literature, which is no safer from Perec's collector's instinct than

anything else. Many of Perec's previous works and those of 30 selected writers are looted for details that reappear occasionally in the profusion of descriptions. The book's 600 pages and 99 chapters develop within a specific moment: 23 June 1975, around eight o'clock in the evening, when, on the third floor, Bartlebooth dies. Death takes him and fixes him at the moment of failure, incapable of finishing the 439th puzzle of 500, the task to which he dedicated his life. *Lieux* undeniably resembles Bartlebooth's project, but there are, nevertheless, some significant differences.

Bartlebooth decides, at the age of twenty, to organize his life around a single project. Like *Lieux* it works around a few principal mechanisms:

The first was moral: the plan should not have to do with an exploit or record, it would be neither a peak to scale nor an ocean floor to search. What Bartlebooth would do would not be heroic, or spectacular; it would be something simple and discreet, difficult of course but not impossibly so, controlled from the start to the finish and conversely controlling every detail of the life of the man engaged upon it.

The second was logical: all recourse to chance would be ruled out, and the project would make time and space serve as the abstract coordinates plotting the ineluctable recursion of the identical events occurring inexorably in their allotted spaces, on their allotted dates.

The third was aesthetic: the plan would be useless, since gratuitousness was the sole guarantor of its rigour, and would destroy itself as it proceeded; its perfection would be circular: a series of events which when concatenated nullify each other: starting from nothing, passing through precise operations on finished objects, Bartlebooth would end up with nothing.<sup>9</sup>

The principal similarity between the two projects is the way in which they seek to programme time (over a prolonged period) in relation to displacement in space. The function of such programming seems to be one of protecting the author from the future by consuming it in advance. Within this, both projects share the desire to accumulate, be it objects, texts or watercolours.

Yet while the proximity of the two projects, both chronologically and in terms of their method of execution, suggests a certain kinship, their respective ambitions could not be further apart. For *Lieux*, Perec undertook a one-way journey culminating in the collation of texts for publication. Even if the purpose of the project was to observe a process of aging, the writing took place in real time, working against forgetfulness, stopping the past from disappearing and constructing a framework for future memory.

*Lieux* had aspirations similar to those of the diary; a hope incompatible with the solipsism of Bartlebooth's project, which,

despite involving a very long journey around the world, never looks outside itself for evidence of being. The project can only be concluded by his death or by the erasure of all that was produced during his life (the destruction of his watercolours). Furthermore, Bartlebooth's project involves competition with another, Winckler, the puzzle maker, who eventually triumphs (albeit a posthumous victory).

Finally, half of the texts in *Lieux* were to be generated from memory, whereas Bartlebooth produces watercolours in 500 sites around the world before coming home to reconstruct his memories of nothing. Bartlebooth, being a character of fiction, whose project and history can go to the end of desperation, shows the absurdity of life itself. He finishes his outgoing journey, succeeding where his neighbour Valène, the painter, fails. Valène, who wants to make a giant painting of the building seen in section, with all its residents, dies in front of an almost blank canvas.

Although Perec eventually abandoned *Lieux* as it became clear that too many of his monthly deadlines were being missed due to new commitments,<sup>10</sup> it also, perhaps, reflects his disenchantment with the 'direct' representation of reality that lay at the heart of the project. *Life A User's Manual* also depends on description to set each character in the world: the description of ten objects in each room (or chapter) is, for example, one of the many constraints that enable the writing of the novel. But in this case all the objects are invented, removing any necessity to translate real phenomena into textual form, even though much of the description would pass for realist. Thus, *Life A User's Manual* differs from *Lieux* in its dependence on literary conventions, leaving the link to a referential world on the level of a secondary consideration.

In *Life A User's Manual*, lists and catalogues, with which Perec first experimented in *Species of Spaces* (and, increasingly, in the later descriptions of *Lieux*), are also widely used for description. The wandering meditations of *Species of Spaces* inevitably return to childhood places, which offer themselves particularly well to 'the ineffable joys of enumeration' – placing into series, making micro-puzzles of things or events. At the initial stage an inventory entails that one does not write, but in silencing literature, the list brings into being a pure writing, a poetic structure that cannot be designed. Inventory becomes list, a list of litany or celebration. The remembered list offers not only the happiness of knowing, but also the knowledge of having ordered one's knowledge.

Perec's first experiment with enumeration was of the services

found in an airport: 'there are deep armchairs and bench seats that aren't too comfortable... toilets... watchmakers and opticians...'!<sup>11</sup> The second list develops in a different, non-nominative manner, listing the present participles of verbs associated with moving house: 'fitting signing waiting imagining inventing investing deciding bending folding stooping... settling in living in'.<sup>12</sup> These experiments reveal one of the most significant changes in Perec's writing, one that would continue through his subsequent work: the endowment of poetic purpose to words over and above their ability to describe the 'real' world from which they are taken. Enumeration enabled him to rediscover one of the most original and effective poetic forms; to number, to order, to list is to catch the upheaval of thought. Michel Foucault argued that the Powers (Church, State, etc.) have used systems of classification to exclude and segregate. Perec, on the other hand, recrosses the same preoccupation at an empirical level, joining Sei Shônagon's *Pillow Book*, the works of Rabelais and Lewis Carroll, or Jose Luis Borges's encyclopaedic *Book of Imaginary Beings* in a similarly ludic and irrational means of representation, bringing together the real and the imaginary in a single space.

The list effaces grammar, the sentence, the paragraph. It takes the word to the work in a single step, avoiding the need for a story or hierarchy. Temporality is removed from the text. Released from the requirement that it imitate the physical world, the emphasis of the list moves away from the object to the perceiver, creating a radical associative world that escapes the limits of description.

Unsurprisingly, then, the structure of *Life A User's Manual* lends itself particularly well to the use of lists. The book's formal organization demands that forty-two elements (objects, characters, actions, references) be described in each chapter; the list provides the author with a systematic way of uniting these heterogeneous elements. Lists of the objects stored in the residents' basements perfectly mirror the novel's own apparently haphazard accumulations, while simultaneously revealing the characters of the personalities who are hidden from view by their self-consciously arranged apartments:

The Altamonts' cellar, clean, tidy, and neat: from floor to ceiling, shelving and pigeonholes labelled in large, legible letters. A place for every thing, and every thing in its place; nothing has been left out: wheat flour, semolina, cornflower... tinned fish, tuna chunks... the so-called table wines, then the Beaujolais... detergents, descaling liquid...

The Gratiolets' cellar. Here generations have heaped up rubbish unsorted and unordered by anyone... the base and posts of an empire

bed, hickorywood skis having lost their spring long ago, a pith helmet that was the purest white once upon a time<sup>13</sup>

Perec's lists bring together dreaming and thinking. Their effect depends as much on what is omitted as what is included; he knows that classification can be the enemy of liberty and that not finishing is productive. More interesting are the dispersed facts he brings together, only exceptionally reaching back to familiar knowledge, placing them in the category reserved for the miscellaneous.

They constitute urgent zones, about which we know only that we know little, but where one senses that a great deal could be found if one decided to lend them some attention: banal facts, passed under an unclaimed silence, going by themselves: they describe us though, even if we think we can dispense from writing them down.<sup>14</sup>

Like Borges's *Book of Imaginary Beings*, Perec's lists destroy accepted knowledge and question the categories which 'tame the wild profusion of existing things'.<sup>15</sup> Enumeration distinguishes between the real and the imaginary, while letting them share the same space. The system of ordering things enables the imagination to accommodate ludicrous juxtapositions. The 'mere act of enumeration that heaps them all together has a power of enchantment of its own'.<sup>16</sup>

Words such as 'in', 'and', or 'on' suggest that things can exist together in the world, but enumeration removes the reassurance that things can be located within language or in the space of the page. Enumeration removes the need for the world to provide an acceptable container within which things can be brought together. The list acknowledges the autonomy of language in relation to the physical world.

The Perecian journey through space has slowly transformed itself into a journey from his city, Paris, to language, where memory and place are always present and constantly overlapping. Close attention to everyday spaces and things was to anchor his writing within the real world; in projects such as *Lieux* he was developing a phenomenological method that would accurately reflect observed reality in language. Despite his commitment to the everyday life, he gradually moved his allegiance away from phenomena and towards language and words.

The stories told in *Life A User's Manual* are suggested by thinking and remembering the space in which the events took place. The rooms of the building allow Perec to suspend and compress time, to provide each character with their own space in

which they are situated, before being sent off beyond the building into the spaces of the past.

The book operates like a map. The spatial coordinates for a story must be given before it can be told. The book unfolds over a brief moment, when every character is situated, stationary, within various parts of the building, with the exception of Valène who slowly climbs the stairs. Each chapter of *Life A User's Manual* is named after the occupant of the space it represents, except for the chapters regarding the few collective spaces (staircases, lifts and lobbies), which are named according to their function. Each chapter starts with a meticulous description of its room, making it visible and purposeful. Every possible detail is given, gradually building an image of its current occupant. As a detail is developed, a story or memory is evoked, the text changes direction, becoming a temporal journey, an exploration of the past. The inevitable story suggested by the description quickly moves away from the present inhabitant to a previous one, or a person who is altogether foreign to the building but who has nevertheless managed to leave a mark within it – the person who took the photograph on the wall or the name of a manufacturer engraved on a piece of furniture. The current resident becomes subjectified within the historical space of the room as the story transgresses its physical boundaries. Every character is situated, the stories are told as a product of the spaces in which their life takes place. The author navigates the space of the chess board, dematerializing its grid as each tale is recounted.

Bartlebooth designs his project to give his life a purpose. It was meant to be challenging yet achieve nothing, occupying his entire life, taking him to more places around the world than any other character in the book (except for Smautf, Bartlebooth's faithful butler, who accompanies him). His displacements prevent him from leaving any traces or making memories. Despite the five hundred puzzles, representing the places visited, he makes no relationships with them – the spaces have not defined him and they, in turn, have not provided him with a site for his memories, only mysteries – the project ultimately reflects the futility of his life.

As for Valène, he numbers and records every story told in preparation for his painting. During the brief moment in which the book is set, the moment when Bartlebooth dies, Valène is remembering and reconstructing each story, floor by floor, resident by resident. He has been living in the building longer than anyone else. The stairs deal with Valène, the trustee of collective recollections.

Yes, it could begin this way, right here, just like that, in a rather slow and ponderous way, in this neutral place that belongs to all and to none, where people pass by almost without seeing each other, where the life of the building regularly and distantly resounds.<sup>17</sup>

The chapter continues with a woman inspecting Winckler's room following his death. Winckler, the puzzle maker, is immediately presented, in absentia, by his chamber. It is not known whether the room has described him or whether it is he who has penetrated and saturated the room with his presence.

Not much is left of these three small rooms in which Gaspard Winckler lived and worked for nearly forty years.<sup>18</sup>

In the next chapter about the stairs, Valène, unnamed until the end of the passage, enumerates a catalogue of past and present tennants. He remembers that he has had the longest tenancy, recalling his own life and how he stayed in the building despite the opportunities to leave in order to upgrade his accommodation. As he climbs the stairs, the space loses its neutrality to him, it has come to represent all the memories hidden in all the rooms which lead away from it.

On the stairs the furtive shadows pass of all those who were once there...

He tried to resuscitate those imperceptible details which over the course of fifty-five years had woven the life of this house and which the years had unpicked one by one...

The stairs, for him, were on each floor, a memory, an emotion, something ancient and impalpable, something palpitating somewhere in the guttering flame of his memory.<sup>19</sup>

The building orders Valène's life. When, during his ascent, he reaches the third floor, Bartlebooth's, he remembers the dying old man in one of the most striking passages in the book. He muses on the passage of time, the passage of people repeatedly moving in and out of the building. The stairs become the silent witness to the removal companies, the undertakers, every visit for minor maintenance or major renovation work, the presence of one occupier effacing the previous one. The building is a memorial to all those people he has recounted and it is a memorial to himself. It provides the armature for the compilation of lives which will make his painting. The spaces are evidence of the freezing of time and of the (re)construction of the lives within them.

Sometimes Valène had the feeling that time had stopped, suspended, frozen around he didn't know what expectation. The very idea of the picture he planned to do and whose laid-out, broken-up images had

begun to haunt every second of his life, furnishing his dreams, squeezing his memories, the very idea of this shattered building laying bare the cracks of its past, the crumbling of its present, this unordered amassing of stories grandiose and trivial, frivolous and pathetic, gave him the impression of a grotesque mausoleum raised in memory of companions petrified in terminal postures as insignificant in their solemnity as they were in their ordinariness, as he had wanted both to warn of and delay these slow or quick deaths which seemed to be engulfing the entire building storey by storey.<sup>20</sup>

Unusually, the enlargement of the space outside the building continues as an excavation of the future. Valène's dreams about death invade him as he projects them forward, casting doubt on the building's ability to retain something permanent. He resigns himself, in the end, to the inevitable disappearance of the building and the insensitivity with which the city and its speculators will cover its traces:

The street will be no more than a string of blind façades – bleak walls, vacant eye-like windows – alternating with poster-patched palisades and nostalgic graffiti...

The tireless bulldozers of the site-levellers will come to shovel off the rest: tons and tons of scree and dust.<sup>21</sup>

The passage recalls the distress expressed by Perec in *Species of Spaces* and *Lieux*. The disappearance of rue Vilin, recorded in *Lieux*, cruelly erased forever the presence of his family and his childhood in the city. Only when rewriting his memories of that place could they be situated in a more stable space.

While Valène is the only conscious occupant of the collective spaces in *Life A User's Manual*, his own personal space is described in terms of the lives and memories of others; his own dreams are buried under theirs, fusing all the spaces of the building, from extremity to extremity, into his consciousness.

The artist slowly makes his way up the building, interrupted by journeys to places around the world, spanning hundreds of years, which points to the decentred and fragmented world examined in *Species of Spaces* and *Lieux*. Valène speaks the unspeakable, representing a collective voice. Through him, Perec articulates the notion of space as an armature for the self to experience and remember the world. He invents a character that is only visible when situated by others, who in turn are situated by their spaces, present and past. Perec disguises space in journeys through time, constantly trying to stabilize it so it may be lived in and remembered.

## Notes

Unless otherwise specified, all translations from the French are the author's own.

1. Georges Perec, 'Species of Spaces', in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* [trans. John Sturrock] (London, 1997), p. 13.
2. For the development of this theme in the work of Perec prior to *Lieux*, see Enrique Walker's interview 'Virilio on Perec', pp. 15–18 of this volume.
3. Perec, op. cit, p. 91.
4. Georges Perec, *Espèces d'espaces* (Paris 1974), inside front cover.
5. Perec, 'Species of Spaces' (see note 1), p. 50.
6. For a fuller description of *Lieux*, see Andrew Leak 'Paris: Created and Destroyed', pp. 25–31 of this volume.
7. Philippe Lejeune, *La Mémoire et l'oblique* (Paris, 1991).
8. For a fuller description of *Life A User's Manual*, see Paul Auster, 'The Bartlebooth Follies', pp. 88–9 of this volume.
9. Georges Perec *Life A User's Manual* [trans. David Bellos] (London, 1987), p. 118.
10. See Andrew Leak, op. cit.
11. Perec, 'Species of Spaces' (see note 1), p. 26.
12. Ibid., p. 36
13. Perec, *Life A User's Manual* (see note 9), pp. 153 and 155.
14. Georges Perec, *Penser/Classer* (Paris, 1985), p. 156.
15. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London, 1994), p. xv.
16. Ibid., p. 5.
17. Perec, *Life A User's Manual* (see note 9), p. 3.
18. Ibid., p. 5.
19. Ibid., pp. 59–62.
20. Ibid., p. 127.
21. Ibid., pp. 130–1.

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—, 'Vilin Souvenirs', *Génésis*, 2 (1992), pp. 127–151.

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—, *La Boutique obscure: 124 rêves* (Paris, 1973)

—, *Un cabinet d'amateur: Histoire d'un tableau* (Paris, 1979).

—, *Espèces d'espaces* (Paris, 1974)

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so good looking

the competition



can't stand the sight of it

*Marcel Bénabou*

# The Lumber-Room Revisited

*Translated from the French by Ian Monk*

Doctors dread fevers whose causes are hidden and which gradually build up far more than those whose origins are patent.

*Plutarch*

*For those who know how to approach them, Georges Perec's writings not only provide a rare pleasure, they can also sometimes offer an even rarer gift: a sort of light, yet tenacious fever from which the only means of recovery – almost with regret – is to take up a pen.*

## The Dazzled Eye

It was a small, windowless room that had long been forgotten. It did not appear on any of the plans of the flat, and its existence had perhaps never been recorded, unless it were in a highly allusive manner, such as a subtle change in the shading of a colour, or a slight shift in the orientation of the grey cross-hatches covering the narrow triangle that depicted Hutting's studio. Was it really a room? Certainly not, according to the older definitions of the word that were at the time being hypocritically defended by certain Parisian estate agents. In reality, no matter how unscrupulous the owner was, or how ignorant of the conventions governing the coded language of small ads, he would never have referred to this area in terms other than *storage space*, a *box-room*, a *cubby-hole* or a *lumber-room*. For it was quite simply a cramped glory hole, of a depth of just over one metre. Furthermore, its existence would never have been suspected, because it was entirely hidden by the painted wall at the far end of the studio.

Shortly after moving in to the building, the painter had decided to reserve access to this convenient area exclusively for himself, and he had adopted a simple, yet effective ploy in order to ensure that it would never be noticed. With astonishing care, skill and precision, he painted on the far wall a scene depicting the very lumber-room which the wall concealed.

Standing perpendicularly on the wall, which was deformed slightly by the perspective, a large number of paintings in sculpted frames were packed together on broad oak shelves, held up by close-set struts, which formed a sort of grid. They were arranged in the squares with a deal of care, depending on their sizes, but not all of the squares were as full as other ones, and some of them were even empty. None of the paintings was identifiable, because only their external edges were visible, and

these were generally brilliant and gilded, or else dimmed by an impalpable accretion of dust. On the floor stood two large sea-chests, with dark iron fittings and various shapes engraved on their lids: crescent moons, stars, rosettes, crosses, along with some monograms and the intertwined figures of anchors and laurels.

The effect was spectacular. Hutting was greatly amused by the embarrassment of certain visitors when, keen to examine the mysterious treasures lurking in the lumber-room, and putting out their hands cautiously to lift up one of the gilded frames, all they encountered was a painted wall. But none of them, of course, would have suspected that this perfect piece of deception in fact concealed from their eyes what it seemed so richly to reveal.

That evening, the painter was rather weary. Shrugging off a slight shiver, he sat down in his Voltaire chair and could not resist examining his wall once more. For he was pleased to have succeeded in placing within it what had so long mattered most to him. He had at last managed to exploit the power he considered himself to have: that of making off with reality and incorporating it into a canvas, or a wall. But this was not something he had discovered alone.

Had he not, in fact, spent more of his life thinking about his art than practising it? While still young, an irresistible attraction had led him to study the painters of antiquity, and he now knew everything about their schools, trends and productions. His mind was full of all those paintings which no one had seen for a good two thousand years, and which he had set about reconstructing. But each time he started to work, he despaired of being able to get close enough to their reality. How to capture the face of that *Ajax*, lit up by a bolt of lightning, attributed to Apollodorus of Athens? What must have been the precise position of Timanthes's *Polyphemus Asleep*, and exactly how many tiny satyrs had been measuring his thumb with a thyrsus? For a long time, he had also been fascinated by orators' gestures, which in ancient times had been precise, coded and as eloquent as the words they used. But mediocre modern gesturing had retained almost nothing of it – merely the equivalent of a few inarticulate cries, or confused utterances.

Such were the problems that haunted him, and finally paralysed him. Especially given the fact that he was not up to rivalling certain modern masters whom he admired, such as Holbein. When commissioned to paint a peasant dance on the walls of a public bath, Holbein had so let the matter drag on – by devoting his time to drinking and dancing – that the impatient owner had been obliged to call him to book. He had then immediately painted two dangling legs just below his scaffolding. The impression was such that the owner thought he could see the painter constantly at work, and was amazed at such a change in heart... Then there was the audacity of Courbet, who had so perfectly mimicked Velazquez's manner in one of his paintings that the jury at the Salon, where he had exhibited his work, refused to believe it was a fake despite the artist's insistent admissions...

This sort of anecdote – which he tracked down with inquisitorial zeal during the many hours he spent reading, and then copied into large log books bound with black canvas – kept his mind in a constantly feverish state. For he too wanted each detail of his work and each instant of this life to be submitted to the secret demands of his art. For the moment, only his wall answered to this two-fold desire. But here the very degree of his success sometimes worried him and filled him with strange fears. The day would come – he was sure of it – when he too would be absorbed inside that scene and become united with it. He would be reduced to a tiny, imperceptible shadow and stand alongside the clear forms he had succeeded in bringing together. He would be there among them, as a modest dab of colour which, as soft and transparent as a petal, would suddenly spring out when light played on it.

But that day, despite being absorbed in his contemplation, his thoughts took a different direction, maybe because it was June, almost eight o'clock, and strangely enough the heat did not seem to be falling, for he felt increasingly sleepy. Pictures filled his mind and, one by one, they recounted the history of his studio. It had all started with a wedding.

### Impasse des Gorges Percées

It was the day when Anton Vowl married Bérengère de Brémen Brévent. This event set off a deal of agitation in the world of letters because of the bride's and groom's pasts and personalities:

he, a discreet and as yet little-known writer; she, an actress at the summit of her career. Hutting had been a good friend of theirs for some time, and knew their story in and out. He had even integrated it into his own life.

Anton Vowl had first appeared in various Parisian salons near the end of spring, 1969. His bloodline was both ancient and controversial. For many years, the best genealogists had stated that Anton's family, as well as that of his close friend Amaury Conson, originally came from the Lebanon. But an American researcher had recently shown that the two families must have become connected in Greece, and not before the eighth century. Such disputes among specialists did not really bother Anton, whose interests lay elsewhere. Having been trained as a philologist, Vowl had placed language at the centre of his preoccupations and made it his main concern. For him, each sentence and each word possessed an incomparable evocatory energy, and the slightest agglomeration of letters, sounds or syllables could set off an endless succession of echoes. He found constant opportunities for the comic or profound inventions he so relished. In this way, he had coined a sort of personal language, saturated with references and governed by rules known only to him. This produced constant unpredictable turns in his conversation, for those listening to him were incapable of detecting the thread which was guiding him through the labyrinth of language. Why, when hearing a dog bark, did he find it necessary to talk on about Caravaggio? Why did he refer to Titian or, by means of a cunning doubling up, to Ribera when referring to a child playing skittles? What on earth could be the sense of those texts of three or four lines, grouped together in little pamphlets, then immaculately printed and numbered before being sent out to a few chosen friends as new year's greetings?

His love of words was matched, or even exceeded by his love of books. He was a keen collector, always on the look-out, and in particular fascinated by the most ancient dictionaries, old encyclopaedias, bibliographies and catalogues, for it seemed to him unfair not to give forgotten authors and unknown works a second chance.

It was in fact at the back of a bookshop on rue des Ecoles that Anton and Hutting had first met. The weather was extremely hot. Yet it was still only May. There was a holiday mood in Paris, young American girls in shorts and trainers were coming out of a Chinese restaurant on rue Descartes and mopping their brows.

For the past few days, Hutting had been searching for a book for which he had high hopes – Dufresnoy's *De Arte Graphica*. Of course, none of the specialist dealers he had contacted had been in a position to provide him with a copy rapidly. Instead of the first edition in Latin – published by Mignard in 1668 after Dufresnoy's death – he would have happily settled for the slightly faulty 1673 reprint which included a translation and commentary by Roger de Piles. So, counting on his usual flair, he was going round the second-hand bookshops of the Latin Quarter. He was certain that one morning, at the bottom of a case, amid volumes of dog-eared piety, among the last traces of some convent library – with its almost illegible *ex libris* on the first page – he would come across the book he so coveted.

The few chance words that Hutting and Vowl exchanged in the depths of this ill-lit almost airless shop, where the dealer kept his oldest books in stacks, showed they had a close affinity. Their age difference – a good dozen years separated the two men – soon faded away. They had the same taste for vanished masterpieces and reputedly impossible tasks. Thus arose a solid complicity between collectors, which before long turned into a real friendship. They took to meeting up every Saturday morning in Anton's cluttered study where, after pushing aside the books and papers to liberate a seat, they chatted for a couple of hours without constraint. Anton, sensing that the painter had a character which was more complex and rigorous than his own, enjoyed telling him of his literary activities.

At the beginning, Anton had made a sort of game of restricting himself to scholarly works, of which the most important was a lengthy thesis on 'Terence's African Disciples', published by an obscure Belgian journal. He had dared to start writing short works of fiction – brief tales covering ten or so pages – only by loudly proclaiming them to be pastiches. In fact, to his mind, his two areas of activity – learned articles and short stories 'in the manner of' – were closely related. They required the same sort of work. Anton felt at ease only with texts presenting multiple points of entry, false bottoms and triple faces, in which each word is both itself and other.

The texts which made his reputation were rather similar: they were utterly free of any trace of a story or shadow of an anecdote. They always concerned a man, alone, in an apparently familiar Parisian setting, being torn between the temptations of the world and the shifting demands of his conscience, in other words, at grips with the ambiguities of existence. And it was not necessary to be a great scholar to detect a strong metaphysical odour behind those pages which left in the mind of the reader nothing but recollections of their vaguely suggestive symbolism.

The unexpected success of these early works emboldened

him. Instead of continuing to use his ingenuity to make the finest possible arrangements for his inexhaustible memories, he decided to take the risk of being completely himself and producing an original body of work. However, for some time, his projects remained uncertain. Sometimes he wanted to construct one of those great cycles of novels, which very often merely bring together the thousand and one imaginary lives of their authors. On other occasions, he was haunted by the old dream of the perfect book, completely enclosed on itself and telling of nothing apart from its own genesis. He had finally opted for the latter scheme when he met Bérengère de Brémen Brévent.

Long before meeting her, Anton had often heard about Bérengère and her dazzling career as an actress, greatly assisted by her singular beauty and firmness of character, which had made her famous. In just a few years, she had become known as 'The Legs', the scene's Hebe, French fêtes', French sprees' best belle, revered in Leeds and in Dresden, cheered from Nevers to Tlemcen and from Brême to Bethlehem. From week to week, the press reported – and often exaggerated – the most remarkable episodes of her now legendary existence. How, aged sixteen, she had been involved in the scandal of the See of Exeter and after being caught – between vespers – in an extremely compromising situation with the Reverends Spencer, Kenneth and Herbert, she had in her defence told her uncle, Exeter's elderly reverend excellence, that these were mere exegeses between respected brethren! Then came the era of her depressed letters to Mehmet ben Berek: the rebel Berber sects' peerless chef set up his tents encircling Meknes's deserted streets. From jebel to jebel, reckless, she went to seek him, but their brief entente had led to restlessness. Then there were her endless experiences with men: the seven Greek ephebes from Ephesus (excellent sleepers!), a replete Celt street entertainer (complete with rebecs and crwths) and even Essex shepherds (of an extreme tenderness between the elms and the yews).

But it was also well known that she was not happy. Such precedent events, largely dominated by the same character, had so far marked her life. And she was beginning to weary of them. She was now looking for a new approach, secretly dreaming of new elements that might enrich her world. More than just a desire, this was now turning into an obsession.

At the end of September 1972, Bérengère returned to Paris, which she had been forced to leave a few years before at exactly the same time that Anton had arrived there. This return after an unjust exile soon began to look like a revenge mingled with an absolute triumph. She had negotiated an extraordinary contract for a triple recital given in turn at the Pleyel, the Rex and the Sélect. As usual, she was being put up by her friend Hélène d'Estrées

whose vast, convenient but utterly unoriginal apartment had a large balcony overlooking the Jardin des Plantes. An old feeling of tenderness attached Bérengère to these scenes. It had been on this balcony that she had first sunbathed naked with Hélène. It had been in one of these rooms that she had first known the delights of love. Little by little, this affection had spread to cover the entire neighbourhood. Above all, she liked going for a stroll there at the end of the afternoon, after her rehearsals. She then dreamt up strange itineraries through the narrow streets, whose outmoded, rustic names were charming to her ear. And, as she walked, she tried to imagine what this 'windmill blade', this 'wooden sword' or this 'iron pot' had once upon a time represented and why they had won this sort of commemoration.

One day, while out strolling near the Mosque, she noticed a peculiarly long and narrow courtyard in an otherwise unremarkable building whose door had been, for once, left open. It contained two tall trees, five or six shapeless patches of grass and shrubbery and, among them, a pathway of crazy paving with two cats playing on it. Finally, the slightly veiled light of a late afternoon in autumn gave this unexpected sight the look of a vision about to fade away into nothingness. It moved her to tears and, feeling her heart beginning to race and her body to tremble, she quickly moved on.

The next day, driven by uncontrollable curiosity, she came back. The small door of dark wood was locked. It had been raining hard for the past hour. It took a soaked Bérengère a long time before her groping hand found the button to open it. The door creaked. Bérengère slipped inside and walked into the courtyard. But the rain had destroyed the harmony of the vision she had glimpsed so fleetingly the day before. A strong scent was rising from the slimy ground – a smell of the forest, of humus and rotting leaves. For some time, she allowed this odour which was so unusual in Paris to invade her. Finally, when the rain stopped, she decided to leave and continue her stroll. It was then that she noticed that a man had taken shelter beneath the covered passageway beside the door.

Anton Vowl's presence was no coincidence. He had a plan. For he had been familiar with this building and its courtyard for some time, and had even struck up a friendship with a retired couple who had lived there (at the back of the yard, top floor, right-hand door) since March 1936. They had informed him that this courtyard had once been called *Impasse des Gorges Perdues* (or 'Cut-Throat Alley') and that it had witnessed certain things of import during the 1960s. His questions and subsequent research had not turned up any further information, but this courtyard had become a mysterious, almost nostalgic place for him, as if it were linked to his own story, to his own distant origin.

The sight of Bérengère de Brémen-Brévent there left him momentarily speechless. Then, pulling himself together, he drew back to let her pass by. But she stopped beside him, smiled at his embarrassment and said: 'Septembers swelter here! They send me! Relent, then lend me the excesses wenches need! Let's get!' And they set off together, walking slowly, jostled by the groups of students carrying placards and heading towards the forecourt outside the University of Jussieu. It had stopped raining. Their first exchanges of words were hesitant. Anton stubbornly stuck to his usual taciturnity, and Bérengère kept her reserve. But when they parted, they agreed to see each other again.

Which they did, the very next day. Anton had anxiously kept watch beside the Jardin des Plantes during the entire afternoon. At five o'clock, she appeared, in a skin-tight dress of gathered taffeta. He stared at her, long and hard, with gratitude, without a word.

Then they spoke, and for each of them it was as if a new language had that instant been born. Sentences they had never uttered, words that had seemed forbidden to them poured from their lips. Anton discovered tenderness, while Bérengère found out about loving. The void that had inhabited them for so long was at last filled. They could not have dreamt of a finer epithalamium.

### The Man that had an Astrakhan Schapska

Hutting, of course, was the first person to be invited to their wedding. But he hesitated before accepting. For the past year, he had stopped going out, and this voluntary incarceration filled him with a morose pleasure. Some days, he used up most of his energy by enumerating all the things he had given up. In such overviews, which had become quite a regular event, he never omitted the smallest detail of the delights he had renounced. Such a worldly event as this marriage was certainly no attraction for him and, if he did in the end decide to attend, it was because his curiosity as a painter won the day over other considerations.

He arrived at the reception extremely late and mingled in among the other two thousand guests whom the couple had invited to the salon at the Cercle Interallié. Allowing himself to drift with the movements of the crowd, he exchanged an occasional smile or nod with the various guests he recognized. On one occasion, he tried to draw near to one of the buffets, but the sudden arrival of a compact group of cameramen ruled out such a manoeuvre. It was then that he was accosted by a man whose dark matt features meant nothing to him, but whose extravagant garments did ring bells. For, over his smart black tail coat which was buttoned up, he was clad in a large Afghan coat decked with assorted flaps of folded cloth. Furthermore, his schapska with its tags and an Astrakhan armband were irresistibly reminiscent of a

Franz Hals character. Ignoring the barely concealed smiles on the faces of the nearby guests, and the comments made in his wake, he stopped in front of Hutting and said: 'Call me Andras MacAdam'. And, without giving his unfortunate interlocutor any time to react, launched into the tale of his adventures in Arkansas.

Hutting politely but rather absent-mindedly listened to the obscure ins and outs of what was apparently an extremely old conflict, whose protagonists were unknown to him and which had apparently been caused by some trivial business about a letter, meanwhile awaiting the opportunity to flee without offending this talkative fellow, who then abruptly broke off his tale, stared deeply into the painter's eyes and, in a voice which drowned out the surrounding din, exclaimed: 'But I know who you are! You're Hutting, the painter, aren't you?'

Already, the conversations around them were dying out. Heads turned to observe them. Absolutely oblivious to them, the man in the extravagant Astrakhan hat took Hutting firmly by the arm and, forcing a path between the guests, led him to the exit. 'Come with me,' he said. 'You won't regret it.' Hutting was utterly flabbergasted and could put up only token resistance. A mixture of curiosity, unease and fear, but which was not lacking in a certain pleasure, prevented him from reacting more strongly. And, before he knew where he was, he found himself in Andras's home.

The flat where Andras had been staying since his return from Ankara had been lent to him by one of his friends, a young linguist called Karl Kürz, whose genius and crazy whims had long been known to both Vowl and Hutting. Karl was the great-nephew of the German-American art collector Heinrich Kürz (today forgotten) and in his Paris digs he had assembled all that remained of his great-uncle's collection, before leaving for Central Australia to study the extraordinary characteristics of the Walbiri language, whose existence he had discovered at one of the Friday evening sessions of the Cercle Polivanov. Then, four months after his departure, without having given a sign of life to anyone, he sent an apparently unintelligible telegram to Andras: no matter how many brilliant cryptographers he consulted, no one had managed to decipher the message, which had thus remained unanswered.

Three years of total silence then followed, after which a letter arrived from a woman, who claimed to be Karl's companion in life. In her rather broken English, she explained to Andras that Karl had lost his wits, would probably never again leave the Walbiris and, as a result, he, Andras MacAdam could consider himself to be the rightful heir of the unfortunate Karl Kürz's belongings and dispose of them as he wished, on the sole condition of not breaking up the collection.

Such, at least, were the main points of the story which Andras told Hutting, as they sat on one of the two rosewood love seats

upholstered in crimson silk with gold brocade which were practically the only furnishings in this highly original room. The only other pieces of furniture were a large, almost circular mirror, an octagonal marble table and a small antique lamp full of scented oil on a high silver candelabrum.

The fascinated painter at last began to understand what was taking place. For, as soon as his tale was over, Andras led him into a tiny gallery where Kürz had deposited a good forty paintings. There, under the light of a plain globe of glass suspended on a thin golden chain, Hutting's enthusiasm continued to rise as the pictures passed before his eyes and he discovered the extraordinary richness of this unknown treasure trove. Even the most demanding collector would have been absolutely delighted.

Hutting was jubilant. His host, who had remained completely calm, let him chatter away joyfully for a while; then, with his usual abrupt style, he interrupted him in the middle of a sentence and said: 'So you like these paintings do you? Then they're yours!'

The rest of the night was taken up by negotiations between the two men, then comings and goings between their two flats. By nine the next morning, the collection that had once belonged to Heinrich Kürz had been tidied away in Hutting's studio. At noon, Andras added two magnificent sea-chests which he had inherited from one of his ancestors, Count Schlabendorf who, in his youth, had taken part in the bombardment and looting of Algiers alongside Lord Exmouth.

After that memorable night, Hutting never saw hide nor hair of Andras again.

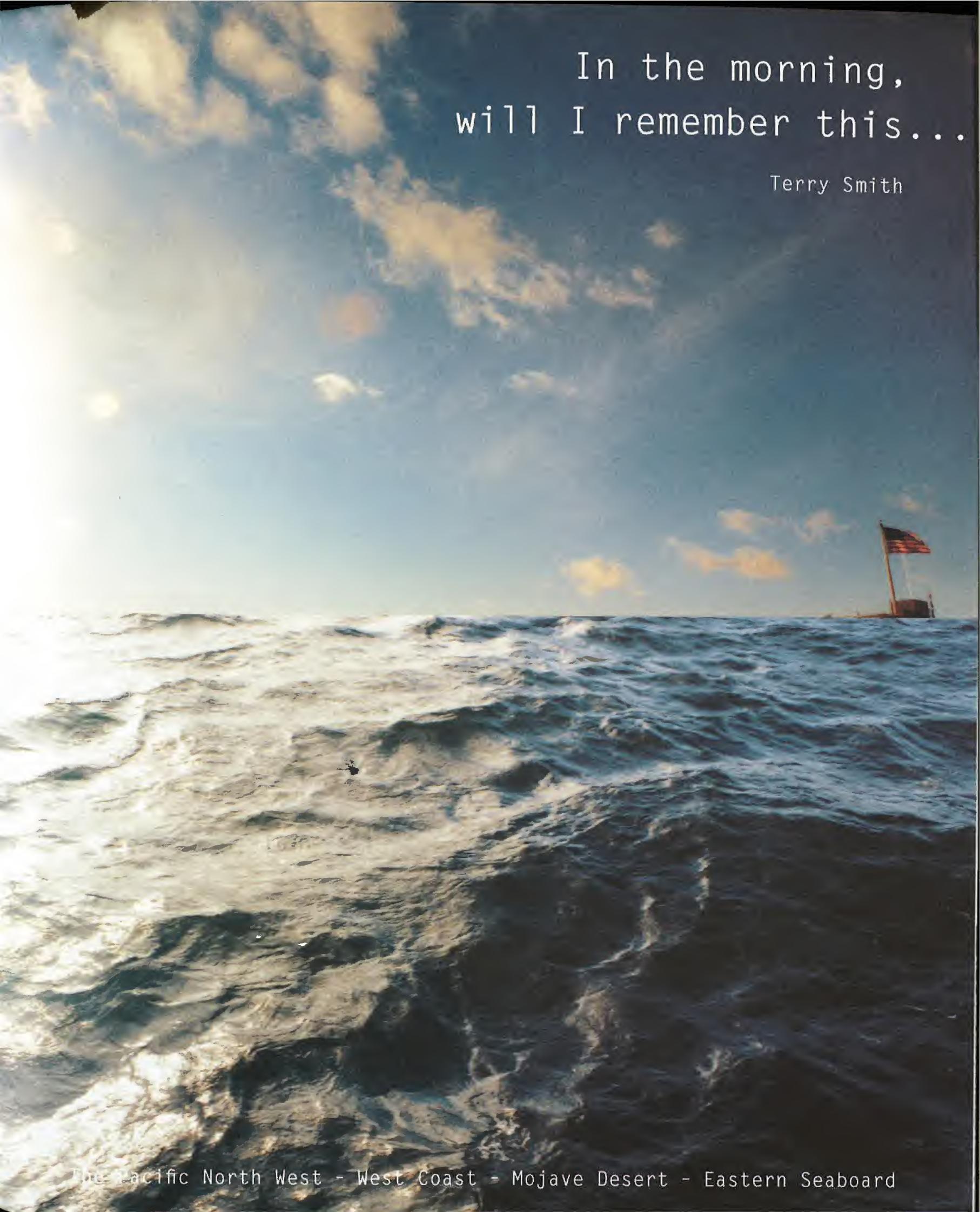
A beautiful June night had now fallen on Paris. On the riverbanks, a dealer in used literature, about to go home, was listening to Alessandro Scarlatti's *Sonate a quattro*; by the Sacré-Cœur, blue-jeaned Dutch lasses were thinking that it was time to go back to their youth hostel on rue des Boulangers and, to hasten their way, they took the funicular railway with their banjos and their binous. In Hutting's studio, all was dark.

Emerging from his meditation, the painter made a decision. He was not going to complete the portrait of the Japanese businessman that he had been working on for the past few days. He would now devote all his time to promoting the extraordinary works of art which chance had placed in his possession, and which he had until then spent more time hiding than exposing.

He suddenly got to his feet, his brows and neck sticky with sweat. With a nervous gesture, he set off the secret mechanism which made the wall swing open slowly. But in the lumber-room, which was now completely lit up, there was nothing to be found except a bouquet of artificial leaves and flowers in a cheap porcelain vase on the dusty mantelpiece of a disused fireplace.

In the morning,  
will I remember this...

Terry Smith



The Pacific North West - West Coast - Mojave Desert - Eastern Seaboard



Vancouver

**Day 1. 15 Jan. 8.30am** Sitting on the tube, East London, the journey has begun. A trip that will take twenty days and thousands of miles begins on a railway built by the Victorians. Saying goodbye to Wendy very difficult. Leave London Heathrow for Amsterdam airport. This is going to be a long day. The flight to Amsterdam is delayed by two hours. This will mean missing my connection. I stand at the desk while they make some phone calls. They get me on to an earlier flight that leaves soon and gives me more time at Schiphol airport. Arrive in Amsterdam. I have always wanted to go to Amsterdam, but does this count? I don't think so. All the signs are in English. I change some pounds for some Euros so that I can buy a coffee and look at the new currency. Get my connection - Martina Air to Vancouver. My seat is in the middle of a row, I hate that, get into a panic, manage to change before take off and get a seat on my own. I hate to fly, but don't want to think about it. Arrive Vancouver 5pm local time. (I think 1am my time.) Met at airport by stringent immigration officials (unfriendly and with a humour bypass). Vittorio and Pogo collect me and take me to the hotel, check in at the Comfort Inn. The room has a fantastic view of the city and the mountains, and a picture of Venice on the walls. Then off to meet with Glenn and have drinks at Daina and Andy's apartment. It has a great view across the city and great art on the walls. Go to a Japanese restaurant, excellent black cod, fantastic. At the dinner table artists Paul and Lawrence join us. Lawrence is a First Nation artist and apparently always gives the whites, especially the Brits a hard time. So far I have escaped this. With a few drinks inside, Daina is encouraging us to go Karaoke, we check out the bar, but it looks a little quiet, it's a Tuesday night after all, so we abandon the idea for another time. After the meal Vittorio and Paolo want to go clubbing, tempted, but I decline. In my time it's about 7am, I haven't closed my eyes for 24 hours. I need to sleep. **Day 2. 16 Jan. Wednesday** Have lunch with Jonathan at a Thai restaurant, great iced coffee, talk to the waiter and he sells me the device for making it, can't wait to get home and try it out. Spend the rest of the day looking at Vancouver. Problems with the transfer from DVD to NTSC tape. It's crazy that there should be any problem. So much for technology. Evening, go for dinner with Glenn's friends Dave and Diana. Had a really great night. Dave is very funny. Great company and great food - Dave's speciality, fish (the cod in particular) perfect. **Day 3. 17 Jan. Thursday** Walk around the city, with Paolo and Glenn, visit a few galleries and see the famous Chinese Garden, Glenn says it's the only one outside China. On my own later, find a café, write.

< Making notes for a video work called Are we the same person our whole life? Are our hearts the same age as our minds? Do different organs and parts age at different speeds? I'm sure my back has aged the most, defiantly late middle aged. My hairline is in its thirties, my face in its forties, (but secretly I hope it's younger). The hands are only twenty, whereas my brain is still an infant. >

< Everyone seems to agree that in the beginning there was a big bang, no one seems to doubt this (at least we never hear of any dissenting voices). I can accept it, but I have this huge nagging doubt: what was there before the big bang? I am not concerned with what caused the explosion, just with what was there before. >

< Once everything had happened and we came down from the trees, walked about the forest floor and evolved, we very soon found ourselves hooked on the shopping channel, with our credit card in one hand and the phone in the other. The question is how do we work the remote? >

< The world needed to be explained, that was for sure. We looked, observed, drew, measured and mapped it. We painted and sang about it. We worshipped it, set our clocks by it, navigated it, tried to tame it. Then we put ourselves in the picture, and sang about that as well. >

Anyway, later in the evening Paolo makes a performance after the screening (he gets almost everyone to participate by assuming a praying posture). Meet Ian, Graham's brother-in-law. After the screenings, dinner at a restaurant (can't remember the name). **Day 4. 18 Jan. Friday** Meet Lisa at Pacific Central railway station. Have lunch. Lisa has some meetings, I spend the day at the gallery getting the installation sorted. Paolo makes another performance at the opening, this time in front of his video, he takes off his clothes. I hope this is not participatory, to my relief it's not. More drinks, followed by dinner at another restaurant called Monsoons. **Day 5. 19 Jan. Saturday** With Lisa. Visit the anthropological museum and the Andrea Fraser show. I go to see the Vancouver City Art Gallery, Lisa goes shopping. Get the train at 6pm to Seattle. Only one train a day. Have a meal on the train as it sleeks

its way across the border to the USA. Arrive Seattle 11am, taxi to the apartment, watch TV, go to bed, take pills - sleeping in Seattle. **Day 6. 20 Jan. Sunday** Walk around Seattle, look at the site for the future sculpture park, get a tram along coast line, have clam chowder. Take a boat to Bainbridge island - roundtrip - it's so windy at the front of the ship that it's like flying. The views of Seattle from the sea amazing. Back on land again, visit Elliot book shop.

< Another table, a pregnant woman, talking to her boyfriend/partner. Or is he just a friend? She is telling the story of a girl with red shoes. Does not seem much of a story, but it is just to illustrate her reasoning behind liking a particular picture on the wall. (The basement coffee shop has bookshelves next to all the tables, stacked with books to read and buy. On those walls without a bookshelf there are paintings - it is to one of these that she refers.) She is trying to be cute and attractive; it can't be her partner. She is flirting, gently praising him; perhaps she has no father for her child and is on a hunt. She is telling him about herself, showing her insight and humour. She laughs at his words, smiles at him. She does not want to appear in any way a threat. But she is trying too hard. He plays it cool. He is interested but unsure. She just wants to be loved, to feel someone's arms around her. That seems fair. >

< As artists we have no audience, no one has to look, no one owes us a show, we just have to take our chance. Perhaps we should demand one thing: if you look, look well. >

Postscript. Update on pregnant woman. Her husband is somewhere else and called Gary, but she wants an affair with the man she sips coffee with, and he knows it. She is mentioning Gary all the time. She is trying to backtrack a bit. This man knows Gary and the apartment. He has been there, perhaps a friend of Gary. She is now anxious not to betray Gary too soon. She wants to show her loyalty to him, but still keep the back door open. She is trying to say, 'I have come this far, but I am not easy'. But she is and he knows it.

**Day 7. 21 Jan. Monday** Lunch with Lisa. Then off on my own to the Aquarium. In the evening, dinner near the apartment. Lisa has cable and 300 TV stations. If I lived in America I would never get any work done. **Day 8. 22 Jan. Tuesday** 12.10 Elliot Bay café. Lunch at Ivan's bar on the waterfront. Called Wendy. Walked to cafés. Try to find Internet Café.

< He sits at the table, an orange bag by his side. He walks around the basement café of the famous Elliot Bay Bookshop, Seattle. He has old and very dirty clothes, a woolly hat and is unshaven, he wears thick socks and sandals. It is very cold out today. He sits at a table without a coffee or anything. The weight of his head resting on his right arm, he does not look well. He is slow and deliberate in his movements. Two men, behind me and to my right, talk about something and nothing, it is now 11am. If I did not jot down these sly observations of my fellow beings, how long would I remember this morning. Even now that I have notated and metaphorically glued them into my scrap book, will these notes be the only record of their faces, as these memories fade into all the others?

Dinner at home. Visit the space needle. The view is great. Get there just before sundown. As the daylight fades, the city lights take over. **Day 9. 23 Jan. Wednesday** Last day in Seattle. Spending a whole day in coffee shops as usual. Went to see the Seattle Museum in Volunteer Park. A bus journey there and back. (I always tread the same path, is it just a habit or part of my nature?) The thing is, I hate routine. But at the same time I do better when I have one.

< There are also days when I get nothing done because I am racked with indecision. Where shall I eat? I look in the windows of cafés, assessing if I should enter. Always the same: I walk on, I get hungry, but still the terror of making up my mind holds me tight in its grip. Until, for some reason - usually out of desperation with myself - I am forced to make a choice. Almost inevitably it will be wrong. >

6pm Munchos Bar by the museum, have cocktails, the Olympic torch arrives on its way to Salt Lake City. Meet Lisa and Mark in the evening for dinner. Get back to the apartment. Get to bed 1.15am (can't sleep). Have to be up in two and a half hours. **Day 10. 24 Jan. Thursday** 4am Get up. Taxi to airport. More x-rays of my shoes. Get plane.



Seattle





Zabriskie Point – Death Valley



Los Angeles



Las Vegas



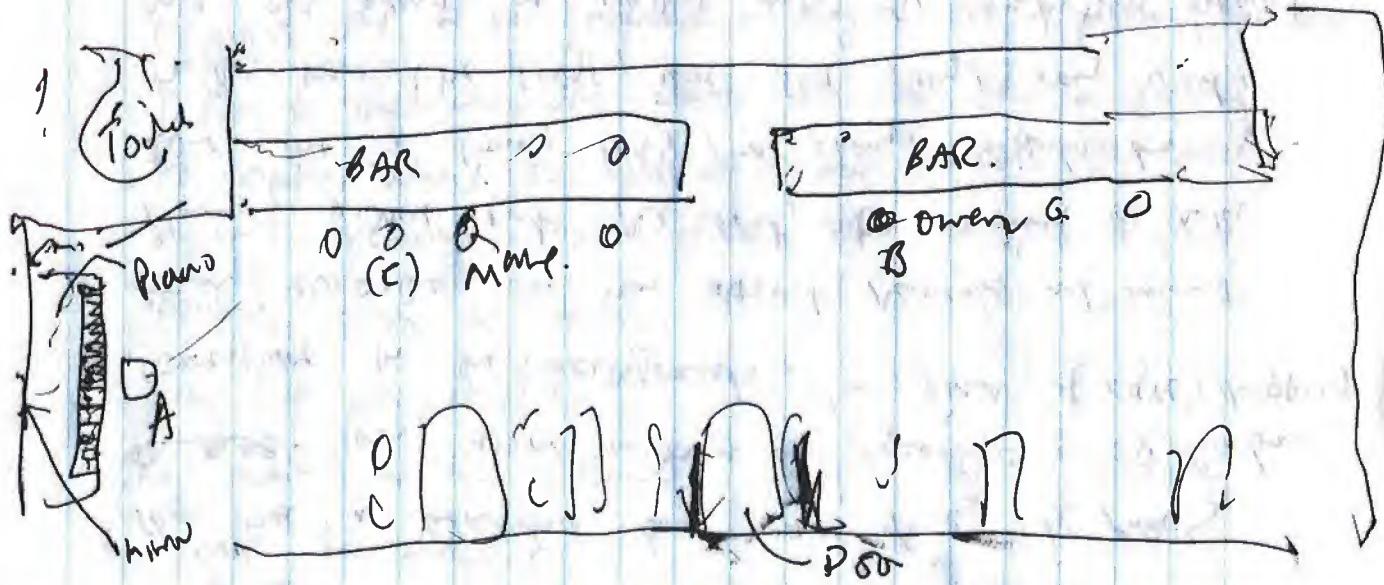
Arrive LAX Los Angeles 9am. Picked up by Steve and Maria. Warm weather for the first time in ages. (No need for a big coat, just a T-shirt.) Go to the apartment at Sunset Boulevard. Get the bus. Go down the strip to Chinese Theatre. Walk with Steve. Go shopping at the GAP. Get haircuts. Drive to Santa Monica beach. Watch sunset. See movie (Black Hawk Down). Been up for about 40 hours (don't feel tired). Day 11. 25 Jan. Friday Leave 9am. Drive to Death Valley in the Mojave Desert. Stop a few times, then, at Zabriskie Point, walk about. I have never been anywhere so silent. Fantastic drive through the desert. Stopped for speeding. Just like a movie, the police car follows behind and flashes the lights - I stop. Maria says 'don't get out of the car'. He comes over and asks if we know how fast we were going. I resist any funny comment. He says we were racing at 39 miles per hour; the speed limit in this town is 25 miles per hour. He asks where we are heading. I say Vegas. He says 'have a nice day'. (We heard that they never book you if you are on the way to Vegas.) Arrive Las Vegas 7pm. It is great to arrive at night, to see the desert disappear and the city lights appear on the horizon. The city is amazing. Get to the Hotel LUXOR. A totally black pyramid. I have never seen anything so dark. Inside, the casino noise is almost deafening. The machines (a rhythmic chanting) are a total contrast to the absolutely soundless space of the desert. Walk down the strip through a few casinos and eat dinner at Seven restaurant. Day 12. 26 Jan. Saturday Walk around Las Vegas, amazing place: New York, Venice, Treasure Island and Excalibur. Decide to eat at the hotel buffet, fatal for Steve and me, we eat till we burst. Maria goes back to the hotel room. Steve stays at the casino. I walk down the Strip for about an hour to see the Pirate display at Treasure Island. Day 13. 27 Jan. Sunday Drive back to Los Angeles. Stop for more shopping and lunch. And another casino in a place called Jean. Caught in the worst rainstorm ever seen, visibility zero (like driving through a cloud). Arrive in LA about 7pm; eat at amazing Korean restaurant. Day 14. 28 Jan. Monday Go downtown. See the Bradley building (this is where some of the interior scenes in the final sequences of Blade Runner were shot). Walk about Broadway. Amazing art-deco buildings. Probably the best I have ever seen. Spend an hour in a video game arcade (could get hooked on the Star Wars game). Lunch in the Mexican market. Meet Maria at the Getty. Get into the lift and Steve introduces me to another Terry Smith. He is a writer who lives in Australia. I have seen his books on shelves for years. At last I get to meet him. We have our picture taken together and discuss other Terry Smiths we have heard about. Go for meal in Bel Air. Day 15. 29 Jan.

**Tuesday** Up early. Driven to airport. More footwear x-rays. Plane arrives NY 5pm. Get taxi to William Street by Wall Street. Meet Colette and Bryn and Ellen. Had some food, talked to Bryn about September 11. He has been traumatised. He saw the whole thing and feared for the safety of his wife and child. I cannot imagine the horror. **Day 16. 30 Jan. Wednesday** Called Janice at the Murray Guy Gallery. Met at 6pm. Went for a drink till 8pm. Back to Bryn and Colette. Some food and sleep. **Day 17. 31 Jan. Thursday** Met Janice again. Walked around Chelsea. Called Linda in Boston tried to get there, but impossible. Wet drizzle. **Day 18 1 Feb. Friday** Met John at EAI. Looked at Dia Foundation (great Bruce Nauman show).

4pm New York, Chelsea, Wednesday 30 January, The Empire Diner. A woman in her forties comes in, puts her coat on the bar, looks at the piano, walks over and plays a few notes. In comes a much older man, looks at her, 'is that you?' 'sure' she says and replies 'is that you?'. I eavesdrop on the conversation. Well, apparently the piano in the Empire Diner is tuned every three weeks. This is a business meeting. She is selling herself very softly; she wants the job but does not want to seem too desperate. But she cannot disguise how important this is. She has the rent to pay, plus her therapist and she probably has a pet, a cat perhaps. Now she is talking too much and is betraying her urgency. The ill at ease always talk too much. Equals exchange. He is feeding her lines and she is providing too much. She wants the job badly, and will say anything, do anything to get it. The man in his fifties is probably the owner. He has the confidence of the owner. But this is New York, everyone here seems confident. She has a beautiful but lonely face, she lives alone, an ex, something in the background, maybe he left her for a younger model. I am getting tired of the conversation and focus elsewhere. She has edged nearer and nearer to the piano. She knows her strengths are in her playing and singing. He talks about the most appropriate kind of music to help the digestion of his customers. At different times of day some things are more appropriate. He knows his business well. She now sits. She talks to him through the mirror above the piano that is tucked into the end of the diner. By the toilets to my left. She gives some examples. Now she sings and she sings well. This is now an audition. He walks away and lets her entertain us. She plays a few numbers, always checking in the mirror to see how he is reacting. ~~he has moved to the centre of the bar, sitting upright. He sits by the bar talking to another employee, on a break.~~

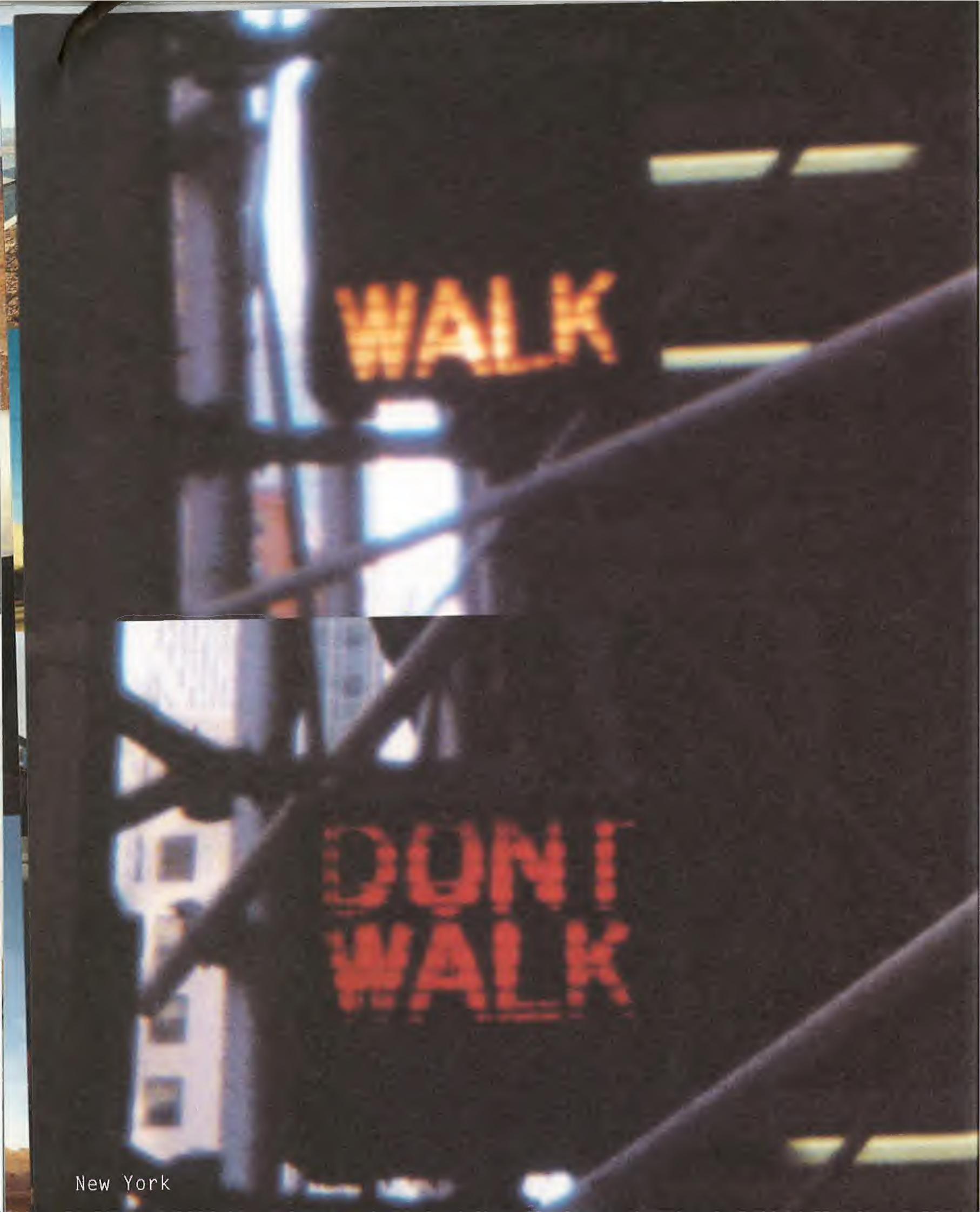
**The situation is like this:**

The situation is like this.



He has now moved to position (c) next to (m)e. She is (a). She knows he is close and sings for her supper. He watches, ~~he has seen many in position C next to me~~. Does he suspect me? He came up behind me and saw me making the diagram, but he would have thought me just another nut, he has seen many. She stops playing and begins to flirt. ~~She little realises he really wants the job. I hope she gets it, she deserves better. I hope it doesn't cost her too much.~~

*Sings for her supper - he watches his back*



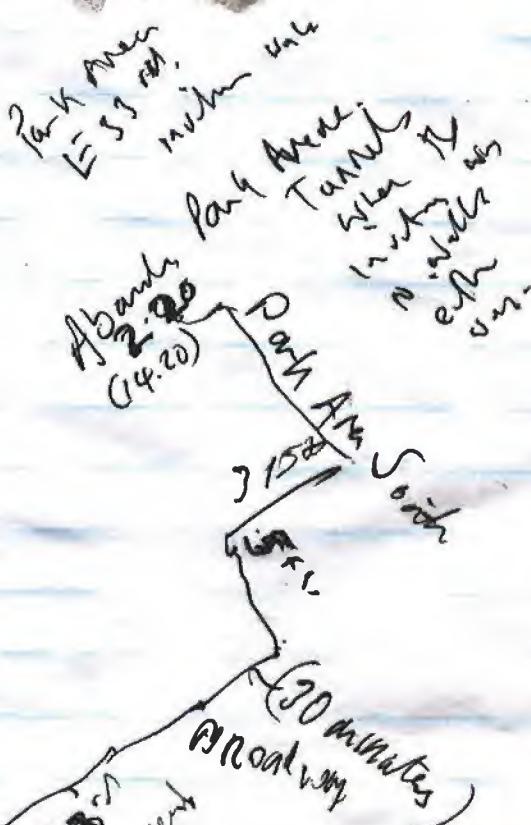
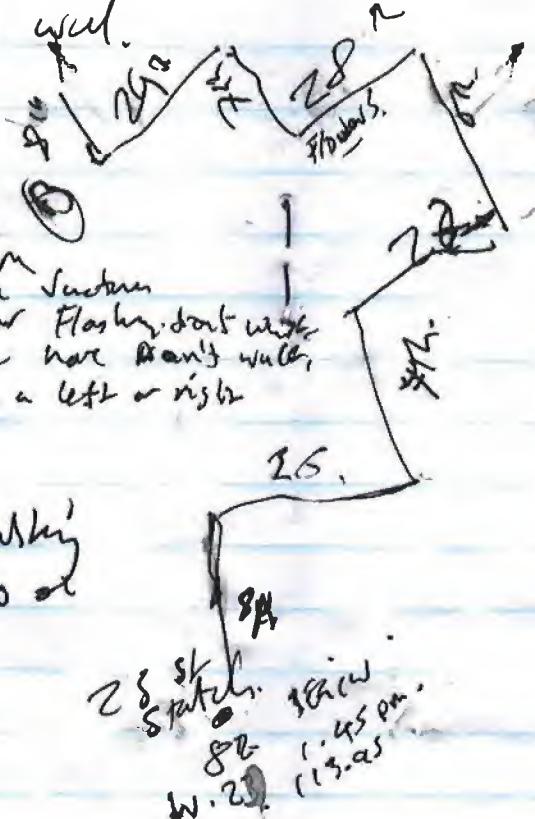
**WALK**

**DON'T  
WALK**

1 Feb 2002 WNYCITY.

60 minute walk.

1.45. 15 minutes walk.  
Walks without stopping,



After 35 minutes of walking  
obeying only the commands of  
walk and Don't walk.

I got to the crossroads  
of Park Avenue South or  
East 33rd street where R  
decided on both directions  
continued walking, at this point  
I decided to abandon the walk

~~Walking is New York. A day in the middle with no place to go, no connection, no intent, no camera. Have been looking for weeks at the WALK/DONT WALK commands to pedestrians. Thought of a way to have my movements directed. and fine.~~

Walking is New York. A day in the middle with no place to go, no connection, no intent, no camera. Have been looking for weeks at the WALK/DONT WALK commands to pedestrians. Thought of a way to have my movements directed. and fine.

I decide to walk in a straight line along the sidewalk until I come to a function (this is the kind of thing best done in a city built on a grid). When I come to a crossroads, I walk across the road if the command is WALK and then I proceed. If it is DONT WALK I try to cross in the other direction; if that says walk then I proceed. If the second direction is also a DONT WALK or flashing DONT WALK command I continue on the sidewalk, making either a left or a right to keep me walking in one direction. In my note book I will make a one-line drawing which will depict the change in direction. I set myself the task of walking for one hour and obeying the rules. I begin, and start to make the odd note here and there. I do not have a camera so I cannot document this photographically. It's drizzling, and it has been wet for days. I am wearing my big green parka, a baseball cap that I bought for five dollars in Canal Street. I try to make notes but the page is getting wet. I am finding all kinds of places: cafés, interesting shops. In fact, all the things I have been looking for with a purpose I am finding by the system of chance. Perhaps this is a good way to navigate a city. I am beginning to wonder that if these lights are regular and routine (which I guess they must be) this journey could be retraced exactly. I could come back and do it all again. I think that if I was better prepared then I would carry a camera and, ideally, chose a day that was sunny and warm. Also, I might carry a number of disposable cameras each labeled with a different subject - pallet, bag of rubbish, etc. This would also mean that I would have a camera designated for things I did not expect. So, as I am walking, I am planning another assault on the city. I start on 23rd Street and 8th Avenue at 1.45pm. On 28th Street I find an area full of flower shops and I wish I had a camera. I think about darting into a shop and buying a disposable camera. It is tempting, but no shop appears. When I get back to 8th Avenue I run out of page, so I continue at point B. At 35 mins. I reach a junction (East 33rd Street and Park Avenue south) where the command is WALK both ways. This dilemma brings to an end the experiment and allows me the chance to think about another attempt to map the streets of New York.

< There are times when I do not know who I am. I don't even know if I am happy or sad. I have no emotion. I am neutral, unable to be anybody. I am just a shadow. Am I ill? Is this normal? What do other people think? Sometimes, when I drive, I forget whole parts of the journey. Did I go through a red light? There is just a complete blank. Sometimes I have days like this; sometimes the days last years. >

Went to MOMA. Met Bryn at 4.30pm. Met James at 5pm. Went to a diner. Look at some of James's work. Very interesting. Went to bus stop. Had coffee in diner. Caught the bus to the airport. Got plane. Watched stupid film. Tried to sleep. Impossible. Arrive Amsterdam airport 6am. Day 20 Get connection to London Heathrow. Arrive in London 7.40am. Get home 3 Feb. Sunday 9am.

#### POSTSCRIPT

Last thoughts/I have to make an admission. When Mark invited me to participate in this project I had never heard of Georges Perec. The first two meetings with Mark, I could not remember the name of the writer and so I pretended. Then Mark sent me two books and some text. I was determined to read them. Only at the last minute did I manage to even start. What I read interested me immediately. And the process Perec used to notate his observations in cafés could have been mine. I have made scribblings in notebooks for longer than I have done anything else. I always carry a notebook. I hunt every stationary store I find (especially abroad) for the perfect book. I have not yet found it. My notes are very like Perec's, describing what I see, usually making little maps to help this description. I did this all the time, either in cafés or on the tube, whenever I was alone with people. It's almost as if I wanted to 'draw' the whole world, to have everything mapped. The original idea for this project was to present images, that I have been collecting for a number of years, of street 'incidents'. Not in the Richard Wentworth style, although he is a very strong influence, but rather like a train-spotter. I was interested in bags of rubbish, in the fact that a black bin liner placed on the street would attract another. It is like a collaboration of different people, each unrelated and unaware of the others. It is convenient to place your rubbish next to each other's. It validates and does not seem like litter. It lessens the offence perhaps. I have photographed other objects, like pallets, that are abandoned in the street, acting like punctuation in a sentence. It is a natural rhythm. New York seems the most similar to London. Mexico City, which I thought would be ripe for this kind of photographic collecting, turned out to be barren. It seems that there, everything is recycled and reused, so, in fact, the streets of Mexico City are much cleaner than are London's. Anyway, that was the first idea but, coincidentally, at the time when the deadline was imminent, I was invited to Vancouver to take part in an exhibition. While I was there I thought I could visit a friend in Seattle. Also see friends in New York. And then I was invited to visit other friends in Los Angeles. So I thought that while I was away I would use the visit to these places in some way, as part of the project. I felt that there was a connection between my thought process and Perec's and I would take advantage of this by doing 'my own thing' and not making a plan. I would do what I normally do: walk, sit in coffee houses and cafés, and make notes. The itinerary proved to be exhausting, but I met so many new people and revisited so many old friends that it was a very pleasurable journey. My plan to walk and drink with a purpose failed, but I feel that even this is in the spirit of Perec. So, instead, I simply presented in chronological order some of the notes and events that document a three week period.

*A conversation between Jean-Charles Depaule & Pierre Getzler*

# A City in Words and Numbers

*Translated from the French by Clare Barrett*

PG: I've brought you a reproduction of a painting I did around 1970-2 [see overleaf]. Georges Perec had it in front of him for years. It combines things I had seen with plates taken from the review of the Parisian studio of urbanism, *Paris-Project*. It was the period when Les Halles (which I also painted in watercolour) was moved out of the centre of Paris... There's the new gare Maine-Montparnasse, the construction of the regional express network (RER) – in the tunnel I wrote 'marl and loose stones, Beauchamp sand'. You can find all of this in Perec's *Species of Spaces*. The tower, in the foreground on the left, is a superimposition of photographs of office work.

J-CD: The cross-section of a building, of course... Curiously, when he evokes the project for the novel *Life A User's Manual* in *Species of Spaces*, Perec refers to a drawing by Saül Steinberg but doesn't mention the inhabited cross-sections of the nineteenth century, those images of Parisian buildings in which you can see the concierge on the ground-floor, the bourgeois families above (more or less well-off according to the number of floors), and right at the top, under the roof, the student and Mimi Pinson. Alternatively they show the various activities which could take place: in the café on street level, in the photographer's studio installed under the roof, passing by the lawyer's office and the dressmaker's workshop... Perhaps it was only later that he became interested in these.

PG: Right at the beginning of the 1960s there was an exhibition of doll's houses at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, I'm not sure if I saw it, I remember I brought back the catalogue for him...

J-CD: I was surprised, rereading *Species of Spaces*, that he doesn't refer explicitly to these inhabited cross-sections. In fact I had seen him manifest a strong interest in this sort of representation. At the end of the 1970s I served as an intermediary to invite him to the architecture school at Versailles, where I was teaching, to be on the jury of a project which took its inspiration from him. The candidate, who drew comic strips, had notably illustrated a song by Renaud, 'Dans mon HLM' [HLM is a block of council

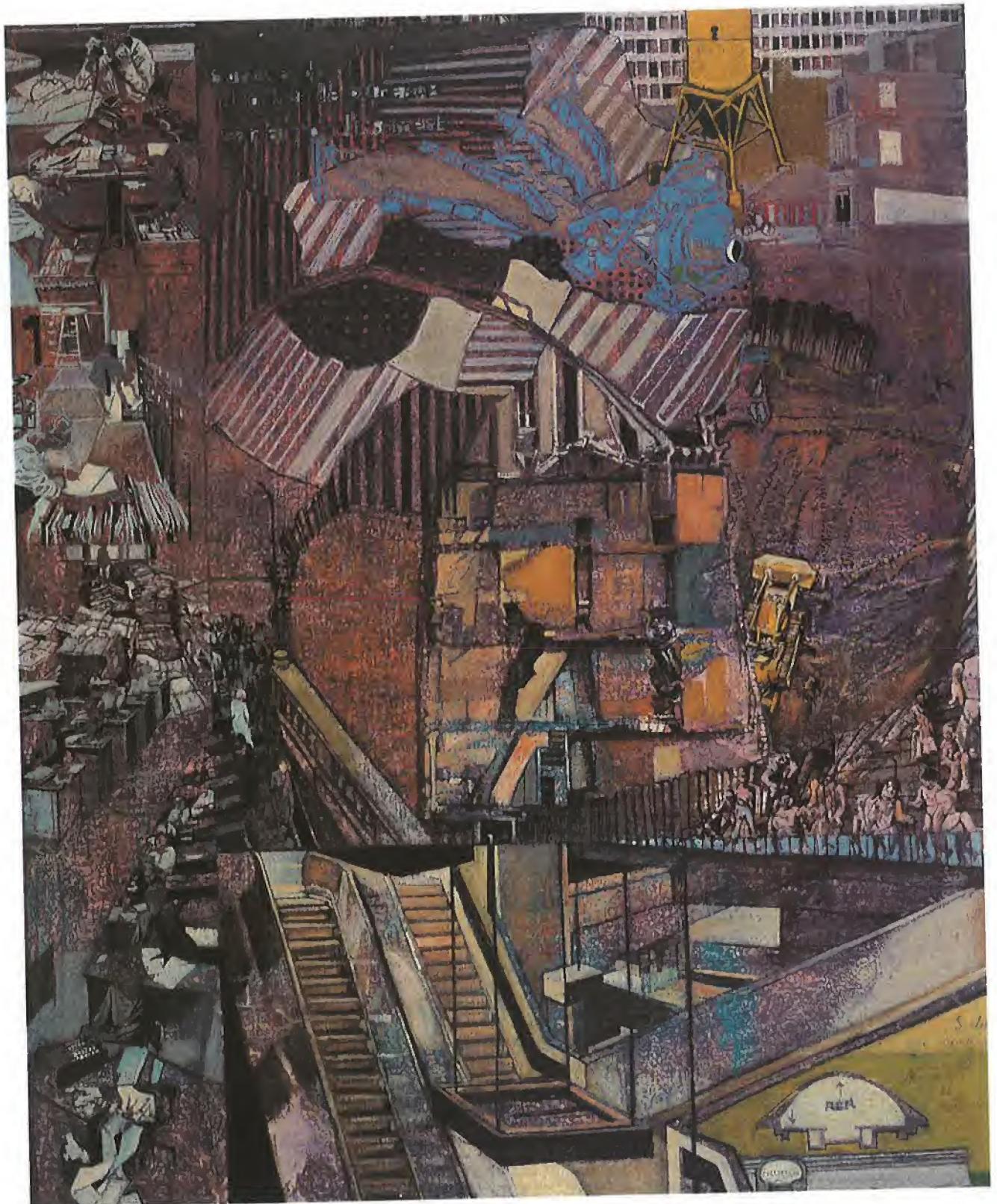
flats], with an inhabited cross-section and had revived an engraving, published in *Le Magasin pittoresque* in 1883, which used a Haussmann-style building to illustrate the theme of 'Paris at work'. Perec accepted the invitation without hesitation, only regretting that he hadn't been given a magnifying glass along with the drawings so that he could examine the tiny details. But I don't know what his comments were during the examination: the student, who was a Trotskyite, thought I was a Stalinist and hadn't invited me to sit on his jury!

PG: In interviews Perec spoke of *Le Diable boiteux*, the novel by Lesage.

J-CD: In *Species of Spaces* he refers to it explicitly, imagining 'a Parisian building whose façade has been removed – a sort of equivalent to the roof that is lifted off in *Le Diable boiteux*, or to the scene with the game of go shown in *The Tale of Genji*'...

PG: The intervention of the devil... I've also brought this photograph of one of my pictures – called *Bref abrégé de l'art des jardins* – in Chinese ink with some highlights of oil paint. It's a type of generalized passage between different types of images: from a plate in a treatise by Humphrey Repton dating from the end of the eighteenth or the beginning of the nineteenth century ('A plain appears a hill or a hill a plain, according to the point of view from whence each is seen'), to the plan of Badminton Park, where the paths are transformed into the tracks of gare de l'Est in Paris. By other devices, somewhat like Japanese scrolls, the 'emaki', you can enter the garden of Ryoan-ji, which itself turns into the shanty town of Nanterre. I looked for something like 'la métaphore unique' (the title of a book by Miklos Szenkùthy). This picture was hanging on Perec's walls.

Towards 1969, he saw me wrestle with a picture representing the Bagnolet interchange, on the ring road to the east of Paris. It is an interchange which is not only spatial and geographical, but also temporal: to it I added some engravings of the village of Bagnolet in the eighteenth century and some Japanese landscapes – we both loved the Jonas Mekas film, *Hallelujah the Hills*, with the landscape that has a Japanese poem inscribed on it,



*Paris Bureaux*, painting by Pierre Getzler (1971-2).

without sub-titles. In this picture the ruins and real Utopia merged: the tower of Babel and a scene in the manner of Eisenstein, or rather, of Dziga Vertov. At least that was the intention, nothing less!

J-CD: Perhaps it is time to point out that you, Pierre Getzler, are a painter, and also the dedicatee of *Species of Spaces*, and you have written a text ('D'un embarras d'espaces') on this book...

PG: About a particular aspect of *Species of Spaces*...

J-CD: You and Perec had a project in common, which was not realized, on the Ourcq canal, to the north-east of Paris...

PG: The Ourcq canal, from the Ledoux rotunda at La Villette, beyond Meaux... the mills of Pantin... We imagined this project in the model of Hiroshige's *Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido*. In those years, although separately, I did a few paintings on some spots of the canal, with combined motifs. He knew them.

J-CD: And you are one of the friends to whom Perec refers with regard to his unfinished project of describing twelve places in Paris: 'Several times I took a photographer friend with me to the places I was describing, who, either independently or under my guidance, took some photos'. He explains that he then, without looking at them (except for one), put them in envelopes with the successive descriptions he'd written, and eventually with 'various pieces of evidence, for example metro tickets, food receipts, cinema tickets, or leaflets, etc.'. I would like to focus for a while on the method that he assigns and proposes to the photographers who accompany him. On the framing. The vision and the description...

PG: The important thing is the posture. If you take notes while you're walking, or sitting, you do it in different ways, you're not in the same sequence. When walking you can make stops in front of a façade or a shop window, and you have the centring given by a window or frame of a door, with its number. If you're sitting on a café terrace, you see everything from a lower angle (unless you're in a town on many levels). Rue Vilin is described by Perec while walking from boulevard de Belleville, at metro Couronnes, going back up to rue du Transvaal, with some stops, but not just on one side of the street, I've checked, apparently he followed the even side and then the odd side, or the other way around, but he does look round. There is a desire for exhaustiveness and method, as if he wanted to construct a linear narrative, with a chronological order, that is constantly contradicted by the variation in focal

lengths and the side-step, the oblique glance that he recommends (like someone looking at the sky who, by changing his view point, alters the geometric layout of the stars). Everything is seen from eye level – he must have been a little under 1.70 m tall. At no point did he sit down. But when he began to write... The words, the names more exactly, are always front on or in profile. To give them a particular angle, you need to add adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, and, above all, you need a setting.

J-CD: Why rue Vilin?

PG: His mother's family lived there, and he went to the local school. His mother had a hairdressing salon on rue Vilin. One day I pointed out to him that they were in the middle of demolishing the street. He proposed that I come and take some photos, asking me to take only the façades, not him. It happens that I didn't obey him, I took a photograph of him too, making his notes, that's been used in several films, in particular in the one Robert Bober made after his death, *En remontant la rue Vilin*. He had asked me to take the façades, but I didn't do what Christine Lipinska did, later, when she photographed façades for him where the openings had been bricked up. I never positioned myself front on, but, how shall I put it... so that I could imagine the movement of the city...

J-CD: From the point of view of someone who moves around...

PG: Let's say: the point of view of Cartier-Bresson...

J-CD: The diagonal...



Georges Perec in rue Vilin, June 1970. Photograph © Pierre Getzler.

Rue Vilin, June 1970.  
Photographs © Pierre Getzler.





Rue Vilin, June 1970.  
Photographs © Pierre Getzler.







Georges Perec in the Café de la mairie, place Saint-Sulpice.  
Photograph © Pierre Getzler.

PG: His 'sideways glance' is contradicted by the fact that he asked Christine Lipinska to photograph front on (mostly), for a privately edited collection of photographs and poems, titled *La Clôture* (there was another book of poems titled *La Clôture* published later, in 1980). What comes out of it is a *trompe l'œil* picture – I'm thinking of the painter Klasen. As for me, I wanted to show that we were moving from one number to another, that there was a contrast, and in the photos that I've taken people move: children are skipping, little girls have a chat, an old woman is walking, another watching. Christine Lipinska's photos are taken later, for me the space they show is already dead, as if a neutron bomb had fallen on the city, which one could only enter in protective clothing – or it could be the scene of a crime. But even at that time lots of people still passed by there. I showed a working-class area, defaced, in a bad state, but not a dead space.

J-C D: And what about when Perec took notes from a still position, his observations of the Mabillon crossroads or rue de la Gaîté?

PG: He was seated behind a pillar, near the bar in 'Café de la mairie', on place Saint-Sulpice. He was taking notes for his 'attempt to exhaust a Parisian place'. This time he had accepted that I photograph him. In reality he had slipped me there to take the passers-by, the motorbikes... I had no idea what he was expecting, and when he gave me some instructions, I didn't follow them exactly.

J-C D: Why?

PG: You need only think of the book by Meyer Shapiro, *Words, Script and Pictures*: imagine Perec is the 'principal' that he evokes. His programme of images necessarily lends itself to interpretations. I therefore interpreted it using my vision of the space at that time: to show the movement, the displacement, but not like he did, in his notebooks, having the referent to mind, which is not always obvious in his descriptions. For example, he notes the '63' going by (that is, the reader is supposed to know, a bus on line 63, which goes from Porte de la Muette to gare de Lyon via l'Alma and vice versa)... When he writes 'a car goes by', he doesn't say in relation to what. He can't describe, for example, the passage of a van in front of a shop on the other side of the road by saying that it hides it, then that a word appears behind it... For me the feeling of the space comes from the perception of a silhouette which hides something else, which modifies the triangulation, which structures the space differently. This doesn't appear in Perec's text, at the stage of his notes. It wasn't practically possible for me to respect his instructions. I had to follow my inclination which was – and now the word is unleashed – 'epic'!

I believe that he didn't really know what he wanted. He had his idea, which was rather literary, textual. The image for him is firstly a source of words, of word plays. As Ernst Gombrich says, 'making before matching'. I had read that. I had told him. He just did it for description, in his own way. He wasn't a sociologist, nor was he a historian or an art critic. He has never pretended to be so. In fact, he denied it.

J-C D: I reread *Species of Spaces* recently, for the first time in the right order. It happens that I'm interested in literature and that I also observe towns as an anthropologist, generally on a microscopic scale. His gaze is incredibly new. And he says nothing stupid. Themes are unequally developed, for example his chapter on 'the door' seems a bit limited to me, it lacks the 'alternative' aspect, but as regards 'the neighbourhood' or 'the town' he raises some real questions. This observation echoes what you say: his intention is entirely personal in his own writing, but, at the same time, he produces objectivity, although it is one that does not belong in any way to the social sciences.

PG: With some platitudes? One of his intentions was to work the common places in every meaning of the word.

J-C D: From the literary, textual point of view that you speak of, I've found that in *Species of Spaces* his references move between Baedeker guides – he quotes a passage 'Very short stop: make haste', that you'd think was Perec – and Flaubert's *Bouvard et*

Place Saint-Sulpice.  
Photographs © Pierre Getzler.



**Place Saint-Sulpice.**

Photographs © Pierre Getzler.



*Pécuchet*. Between the writing of efficacy (Baedeker) and that of...

PG: ...the ‘machine célibataire’. From Baedeker to *Bouvard et Pécuchet*: from parsimony to exponential flood!

J-CD: In fact, I tend to dissuade young researchers from using Perec. The dissertations of so many architecture students reveal how strong the temptation is to quote wildly from *Species of Spaces*.

PG: For this reason I’ve written ‘architects have read him’. Could one also say ‘sociologists’?

J-CD: A lot less. And then researchers are interested in *Life A User’s Manual*. The venture is dangerous: Perec isn’t Zola (whose importance I don’t minimize at all), his relationship with writing is not the same, he doesn’t make the language ‘work’ in the same way, in particular in the links that it has with the structure of the inhabited space.

PG: That’s true.

J-CD: But I came to propose to the students an exercise inspired by the text on rue de la Gaîté in Paris. The result was stimulating. After having attentively read the method ‘apply yourself, take your time’, set out by Perec, (who questions himself piercingly over the way to track down the banal, the non-remarkable), a student showed how, once his desire for neutrality, objectivity and exhaustivity is declared, he directs a particular look: it is not only, as you’ve pointed out just now, that he looks from a certain height...

PG: ...and, in my opinion, he’s thinking not only of Japanese prints but also of the way of framing a photographic shot which was practised from the end of the nineteenth century, that’s to say ‘unframed’, uncentred. He knew Atget and Walker Evans, Cartier-Bresson certainly, Doisneau without doubt... He knew above all the cinematographic style, the framing of Dziga Vertov, or Eisenstein or Dovjenko, who practises ‘overhang’ above all. I’m thinking too of Busby Berkeley, who filmed such beautiful ballets in the American musicals. He loved him, but didn’t, or couldn’t, follow. And of Hitchcock in *Rear Window*. Cinematographic framing and linking... He was a passionate film buff.

J-CD: He doesn’t only frame his shots from a certain height, he only sees certain things.



Georges Perec in the Café de la mairie, place Saint-Sulpice,  
Photograph © Pierre Getzler.

PG: Yes. No smells and, even more, no scents, no urine, no sounds, no shouts, he needs a taxi driver to tell him: ‘it was more noisy before the war’, he’s in a silent film, and it’s in black and white (or just with some primary colours). He reads letters, figures, and he counts (buses, pigeons). He also recalls information which is ‘out of the picture’, that he can’t read on the buildings: the name of the architects of the église Saint-Sulpice, for example.

The objects that he describes are generic (the work of the writer exalts the objects by abolishing the infra-ordinary in them – there are no minor details), particular qualities are taken separately, they are eventually going to be added, in a fiction like *Life A User’s Manual*, according to a formal combinatory matrix. The description is generic, suspended: the objects are pegs, where you can hang quotations, memories – they function conversely to the art of memory as Frances Yates studied it, where abstractions are hung on singularities. The reader can project himself onto it like in a horoscope, like in the *I Ching*.

J-CD: According to you, reader and ‘co-watcher’, he builds a vision of the city?

PG: I’d like to point out what, in my opinion, is a misunderstanding: Paul Virilio links Perec to Guy Debord. Certainly he wandered around the town, but I don’t think it was in the ‘drifting’ way of the situationists. Perec’s step, that of a geometrical surveyor making notes in a notebook, is of a different order. I ask myself: why determine something and then want to see it again later? For rue Vilin, one can understand it fairly easily.



Place Saint-Sulpice. Photograph © Pierre Getzler.

It was going to disappear. And rue de la Gaîté was threatened. But not place Saint-Sulpice. The *Lieux* project is not homogeneous. For rue de la Gaîté as for rue Vilin there exists, in my view, a strong link with the engravings of Paris by Charles Méryon, which immortalize a town that was demolished by Haussmann. The poet Pierre-Jean Jouve speaks of their fanatical precision (which doesn't prevent him from depicting the naval battles behind the lycée Henri IV). The anguish of the detail...

A vision of the city? In my opinion it refers to the idea of the network. I was speaking earlier of the unique metaphor, metaphors merging into one other, a type of constant metaphor. With Perec one takes metaphors at face value. As the poet Jean Tardieu says in *Accents* (1932–8), space is 'dwellings' of 'adjacent objects encased one within the other to infinity'. With Georges Perec it's dwellings, but you don't know where the doors are, or the walls. Worse than curtain walls! At the same time you're in the dictionary. You're in a cocoon, a uterus, and in the hall at the gare Saint-Lazare. Each word in the dictionary, each geographical place, is a place for dispatching. The hall is an orientation room. Whether the banal is ancient, antiquated, modern, we don't know. There's this idea of setting up the mechanics which allow us to simulate not only a destiny, but a movement of history. Combinatory matrices in which, as a little clockmaker, one introduces a joker, to get the unexpected.... For want of a clinamen.

Isn't it strange that we come thus to speak about history?

J-CD: We're talking in any case of a piece of work about time, about memory.

PG: Concerning rue Vilin, he says that eventually, through the

surveys that he will have made between 1969 and 1980, we will perceive 'at the same time the ageing of places, the ageing of my writing, the ageing of my memories'... I believe that he hopes to see, in the ripples of a network of wefts or screens, something of a memory reappear, a motif. And the machine that he constructs ends up operating on its own. A literary genre.

J-CD: But the anxiety remains in the difficulty of looking at the city, of confronting its complexity, its frightening, tragic side (yes, these are his words). For Perec, writing in the conclusion of *Species of Spaces*, 'space is a doubt', the city is a mysterious object. He advances towards his subject on tip-toe, and his remarks are conjectural. 'Don't be too hasty in trying to find a definition of the town; it's far too big'...

PG: He dreamt of an urban (family) saga, but he would have needed a combinatory matrix far more complex than that which he mastered in his novels. The affair is already sufficiently complicated on the scale of the bourgeois building – not a block of council flats nor a housing estate in the suburbs – in rue Simon Crubellier, on the scale of *Life A User's Manual*.

J-CD: Of Paris he wrote: 'I like my city, but I can't say exactly what I like about it. I don't think it is the smell. I'm too accustomed to the monuments to want to look at them.' (I am fond of this Walter Benjamin-like remark.) Or again: 'I like certain lights, a few bridges, café terraces. I love passing through a place I haven't seen for a long time.'

PG: He liked to reread books too... He doesn't talk about communication nodes, places of transfer, or administrative centres, etc... Pointless. Every word was already that, a node of interchange.

J-CD: He draws up inventories of what he finds in a town, in this case Paris, or, rather, of what he retains. 'You must either give up talking of the town, about the town, or else force yourself to talk about it as simply as possible, obviously, familiarly.' And ever this self-same desire...

Sunday 10 February 2002  
Boulevard de Port-Royal, Paris



# Accidentally on purpose

*Richard Wentworth*



Cities are hard. The country, so called, is soft. We come to cities to make our mark. Cities are made up of soft things which have hardened. A hundred materials with soft igneous histories. Masonry and glass from silts and sands. Timber from seedlings.  
Add fire. Add water.

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We press on the city and it presses back. We supply  
the wear and tear, and the repair. Habitable ground,  
like us, is soft. In cities we compose and distinguish –  
soft landscapes here, hard landscapes there.

Daniel Defoe invented an impressionable sandy  
beach for Friday's footfall. We, like him, want to say  
'We were here'. What else is a photograph?

*Paul Virilio*

# A Walking Man

*Translated from the French by Clare Barrett*

In my memory, Georges Perec appears in motion. Like the passers-by in 'The Man of the Crowd' he proceeds in silence.

A passenger of Parisian pavements, I see him forever rushing off in search of the traces of an improbable time when space dissolves in the recollection of some astonishing acts.

For our friend Perec, the city is no longer even a stage. Paris is a cinema, a permanent cinema in which, from our front row seats, we watch what we would not normally watch, listen to what we would not otherwise hear.

Like an impressionist painter in front of his subject – rue Vilin or place Saint-Sulpice – Georges Perec looks to the side (always sideways) in order to reject the fixed view, the voyeur's squint, and to drift from object to subject, from things to the general rumble of an epoch.

For this crossword enthusiast, locating the infra-ordinary consists in refusing, above all else, the dislocating effects of the extraordinary, the draw of apparent singularity that destroys a city more surely than any bombardment.

During our walks, our collective and often repeated approaches, our conversation never condensed into anything face-to-face, but continued side by side, shoulder to shoulder, you might say.

Moving in parallel, with the current of the street, our exchanges would never run into disruptive affirmations; we were concerned only with the passing impression of (almost) imperceptible events...

Well before the roars of expressionism returned to haunt the end of the century, Perec, the patient inspector of the 'boutique obscure', knew how to perpetuate the phenomenological approach.

Just like Restif de la Bretonne, who exclaimed on the eve of the Revolution, 'How many things there are to see, now that all our eyes are shut!', Perec, after the events of May 1968, contemplated what was revealed in the harsh light of day, approaching the evidence with small, modest strokes, as if to sketch out what one might call 'a topo-analysis of ordinary places'.

Before other authors of his generation had begun to sink, one by one, into postmodern depression, Georges Perec had learned how to seek out the attraction in that prosaic wonder that comes about when, by right of rank, the archangel of the banal succeeds the 'angel of the bizarre'.

A child of the war, Perec, like many others, was an unfailing witness to the drama of a total war. A voyeur, in fact, but a voyeur threatened by disappearance, haunted more by a fear of foreseeing than of seeing. There was no immodesty in this, no sense of guilty indiscretion, only an innocence of the anguish that accompanies creation in the midst of general indifference. From here, perhaps, came the passion for cinema spectacle, the surveillance camera, and equally for the sports of the stadium – the outdoor theatre of collective passion for which *W, or the Memory of Childhood*, is a metaphor (the Olympic stadium being for Germany what the circus was for Kafka's America).

In his 1977 film, *L'Œil de l'autre*, for example, Perec introduced a notion that everyone else would be alarmed to discover a quarter of a century later: liberty is under total surveillance! The spectacle is total, of course, but within it we are at once the enthralled spectators and the threatened actors; voyeurism and exhibitionism are one and the same thing.

It is strange, then, given their shared affinity for the 'cinema of reality', that no one makes the obvious link between Guy Debord and Georges Perec. No one attempts to analyse the Utopian scope of observation in *Life A User's Manual*, the cutting and pasting of scenes of daily life that already hints at the telescopic sequence of *Species of Spaces*.

Another omission that is characteristic of the desire to diminish the work of our friend arises from the impasse over the urban *dérives* of situationism. In fact, all means have been and, indeed, are still being used to empty Perec's work of drama. I find this willingness to 'stylize' a body of work that is open to its century exhausting. It is as if he was a writer of children's stories, a raconteur providing family entertainment. Ultimately, there seems to be a desire to make the author of *A Void [La Disparition]* disappear, to make him disappear while all the while celebrating him. You could not do it any other way! Here, as elsewhere, postmodern depression has held sway; *fin-de-siècle* infantilism has struck. Hence the lack of interest in the singular destiny of Perec and the sleight of hand that conceals the literary importance of *W* in favour of *Je me souviens*, for example.

But let us not play with the order of things, it is too easy. No, Georges Perec is not asleep and does not, in any way, wish to lull children to sleep. He walks streets of exodus, he accompanies Sarah Kofman, who chose to denounce the return of Babel by taking her own life, in her exile on the corner of the 'rue Labat'.<sup>2</sup>

(To convince yourself of this simply re-read his texts in Jean Duvignaud's *Cause commune* and 'L'orange est proche' in particular.) Like all those of his generation whom the war left in a state of alert, expecting the worst as much as the best, Perec was not 'naïve'; he was a 'native', a primate of the eccentric art called war. An art of everyone against everyone else, in which the games that would decide Europe's destiny resembled the *Chants de Maldoror* rather than any nursery rhymes.

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In fact, Perec was in no way the amiable man of letters that he is generally thought to be; rather he was a contextualist determined to discover, between text and its context, the hidden sense of words. Hence his private detective's or, more precisely, investigative journalist's powers of insight. A conscientious objector, this former paratrooper refused, above all, to be taken in by the haranguing of the tenured demagogues who held sway after May 1968. Hence the importance of the return to plural thought that came with Barthes or Foucault and, above all, the major role played by one Jean Duvignaud during the sketching out of postmodernism (or, to put it another way, the great depression of engaged intellectuals).

And so to the great metaphysical question: Why is there something rather than nothing? To which the limited group that made up *Cause commune* added: What do we do when we do nothing? And, above all, What do we see when we see nothing? Hence the rejection of the hierarchy of the crucial and the anecdotal which would lead to the concept of the 'infra-ordinary', while at the same time Deleuze and Guattari were exploring that of minor literature, in Kafka for example. How can one not understand that Perec and others were taking part in a reversing of trends, where the major gives way to the minor, where humility once again becomes the truth of letters, standing up to the sonorous snoring of the trashy academicism that will soon hold sway over the Paris scene...

Today, untroubled by any literary purgatory, the author of *A Man Asleep*, can rest in peace. The main threat to his reputation is the ill-considered chattering and dubious adaptation for the media of his writings and remarks. Crowded by a host of improvised commentators and official interpreters, the work of our friend Perec really requires, above all else, silence: the silence of re-reading that highlights the enigmatic character of all his

work, since, as we all know, *every man dies unknown*.

Unless we, his patient readers, take care, there will soon be a make of bicycle that bears his name, just as there is already a car named after Picasso... Already famous in Olympic stadia,<sup>3</sup> Perec now runs the risk of being confused with the consumer products of the leisure industry.

Even if, some time ago now, his name was given to a 'little planet',<sup>4</sup> Georges Perec is not the Little Prince of Saint-Exupéry's tale, but a man of the most extreme combinations,<sup>5</sup> the observant watcher of metropolitan drifts; drifts whose violence has never ceased to grow, not only with the now customary incivilities, but also with the programmed and systematic demolition of the 'grands ensembles'. Before this fatal spectacle, where the fabric of peripheral urban areas disappears in an instant, the stripped façade of the building in *Life A User's Manual* takes on a different meaning to that of the simple game of happy families. It foreshadows the brutal unveiling of a dwelling place, the breaking of the ties that were formed here and there, through the history of a minor zone now abandoned by everyone.

Another aspect of the temperament of our author is his rejection of 'the countryside', of that form of nature which is much vaunted by the lovers of weekend breaks. Georges Perec was, above all else, the prototypical 'urban nomad', a habitant of the inhabitual, of those places where nothing grows, but where everything is thrown out each morning along with the garbage. For him, the countryside was primarily a place of banishment, the great suburb of a lost illusion: that of European culture.

Unlike Victor Segalen, with whom, it seems to me, he shared a certain literary complicity, Georges Perec detested the 'exotic', that is the quest for the extraordinary that accompanies incessant travel. His attraction to the 'infra-ordinary', which has already been evoked, could only distance him from faraway places, make him the fervent enthusiast of that which is near, very near. In other words, if a neologism, is allowed, of the 'endotic'.

For Paulette Perec

#### Notes

1. Perec's *La Boutique obscure: 124 Rêves* was published in 1973.
2. Sarah Kofman, *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* (Paris, 1994).
3. Marie José Perec, an Olympic champion for France in 1992.
4. (2187) PEREC = 1982 UJ
5. Remember that the author of *Species of Spaces* wanted to give his editor a collection devoted to mathematical spaces.

Jean Baptiste Marot

# Paris for the Cinema

Translated from the French by Clare Barrett

When Eric Rohmer decided to make the film *The Lady and the Duke* [*L'Anglaise et le Duc*], he looked for a painter who could produce 'fifty classical landscapes a year'. Landscape is a subject that has always interested me, and I had already reinterpreted some classical paintings for scenery commissions, in particular for Stéphane Braunschweig's scenography. Consequently, a set-designer friend, who knew my work, introduced me to Rohmer. Today there are few opportunities to explore the codes and standards of classical painting. What attracted me at once to this project was the opportunity to put into practice an idea which is always present when you paint: that of being able to enter into the picture.

The idea of using paintings for the exteriors in the film derived, above all, from the wish to escape the typical alternatives available to makers of historic films: building huge sets, shutting oneself in one of those eternal period enclaves, or going to film a Paris of the past in Bordeaux or Provins. Painting has often been used in the cinema, either openly, in the fashion of stage sets (as in Rohmer's 1978 film, *Perceval le Gallois*), or to produce special effects (where it was destined to disappear as a technique) such as the paintings used in early science fiction films. What is original in Rohmer's project is the prominent place he gives to the

paintings in the very conception of the film, and to the search for an equilibrium – and even a real ambiguity – between cinema and painting. And this is in order to tell a story in which the setting (Paris during the Revolution) belongs to a period of which the only remaining colour images are painted views.

It was therefore a matter of producing all the exterior views of the film: 36 pictures which had to be able to situate the actors in both space and time (the story unfolds over several years and several seasons). To enter this pre-Haussmann Paris, which has largely disappeared, I carefully examined images of the period, but painters and engravers were interested above all in the more remarkable events and places. More rare are those artists like Boilly or Mercier (in his literary 'tableaux') who took the trouble to describe the details of the Paris streets. Marville's photographs, taken just before the destruction carried out during the Second Empire, taught me a lot, as did the methodical lists of the old quarters made by Albert Laprade in the 1930s. To find my way around I used contemporary maps, particularly Verniquet's famous map of 1786, which I related to the topographical summaries of the Institut Géographique National. But the main work of locating a place was achieved through walking the streets, photographing them, and sometimes measuring them. This type



Rue Saint-Honoré. View towards the east and the église Saint-Roch (50mm focus).

Rue de Miromesnil. View towards the south (50mm focus).

of work is so obsessive that you end up seeing only the fragments of Paris that relate to the period and that can help the pictures. In a way, the series of paintings is like a walk through Verniquet's map, following the steps of the film's heroine – an English aristocrat – as she moves around with fear and caution. At the same time, the collection of painted views forms a constellation that spreads out over the western half of the city, from the medieval centre up to the then recent urban landscapes at the edges (place Louis XV, the tollgate of the *fermiers généraux*, the suburbs) as much as the characteristic landscapes of a city that, only recently open to its surroundings (since the demolition of Charles V's wall by Louis XIV) has temporarily closed in on itself due to a new customs enclosure which has now become a police enclosure. These views form three axes:

X the first, parallel to the Seine, goes from the Palais Royal, the residence of the Duc d'Orléans up to Grace Elliott's hôtel (rue de Miromesnil) passing, along rue Saint-Honoré, église Saint-Roch and the convent of the Feuillants.

Y the second, more or less perpendicular to the first, descends rue de Lancry to the Barrière de Vaugirard, by the Porte Saint Denis, the Pont-au-Change, the Pont Saint-Michel and the église des Carmes in rue de Vaugirard.

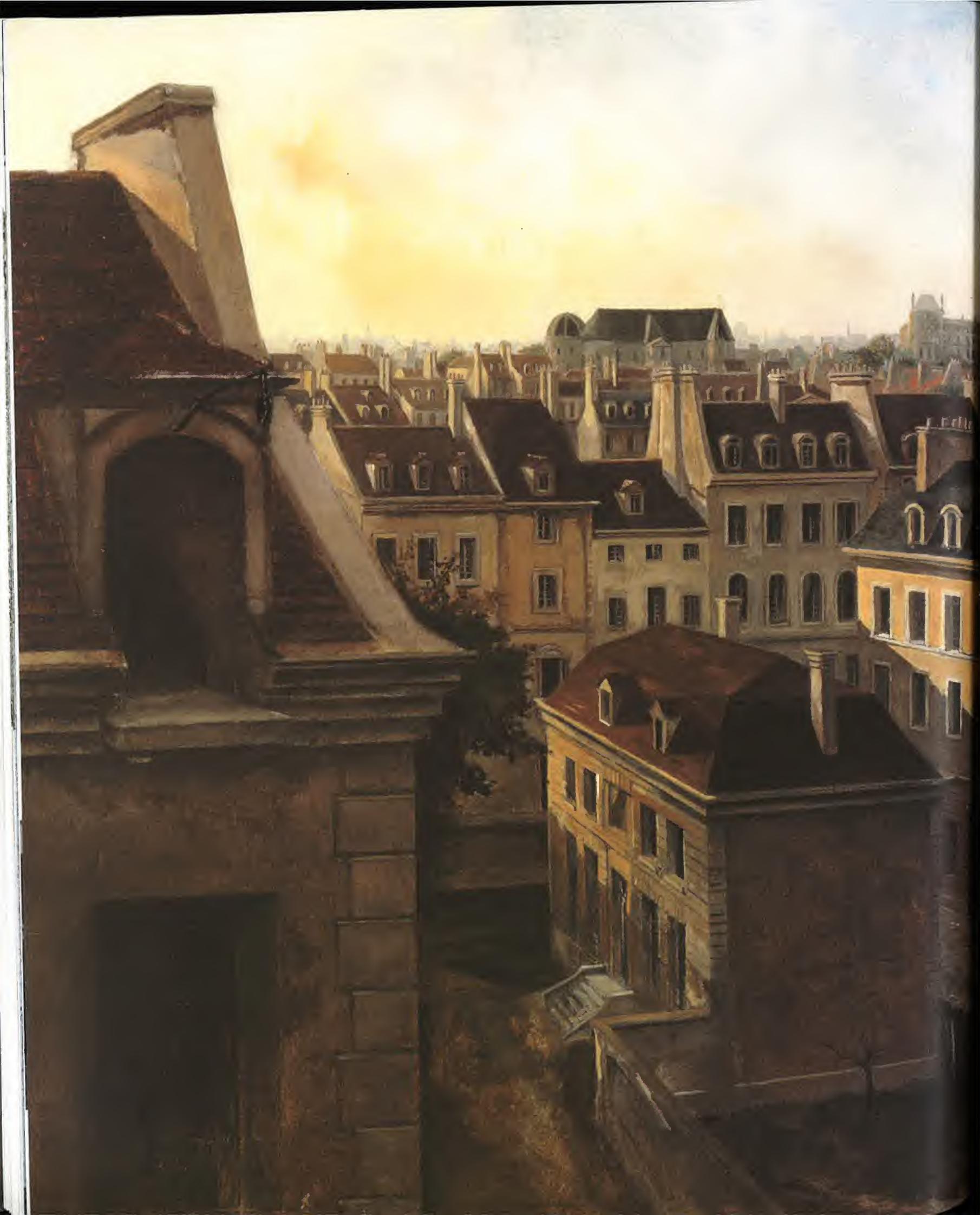
Z the third, oblique and ascending, leaves place Louis XV, crosses the Seine by the Pont Louis XVI, passes by the Invalides and goes up to Méridon.

The view of the roofs from Grace Elliott's hôtel (see overleaf) shows Paris from the extreme west of the first alignment. You can see, marked out by the roofs of Saint-Roch and the Polish church, the course of rue Saint-Honoré. It is this route that the Duc d'Orléans takes at the beginning of the film, when he comes from the Palais Royal, where he has had the *bâtiments de rapport* constructed around the garden, to his Folie de Monceau. In the passing shot of Saint-Roch, where you see the Duke's carriage go by, Rohmer asked me to paint on a gable, like a glimpse of history, a publicity panel for the joiner Duplay (see facing page, bottom left), a minor entrepreneur to whom Robespierre rented an apartment (a decree of the time had recently forbidden hanging signs as they caused numerous cranial injuries). Nearly a third of the pictures in the film show rue de Miromesnil, now newly divided, and Grace's hôtel, which is situated almost at the very edge of the city. The shots and reverse shots in this street show us, on one side place Baveau where one can make out the wall of Hôtel d'Evreux (the future Elysée Palace; see facing page, bottom right), and on the other the countryside of the Monceau plain (this page),

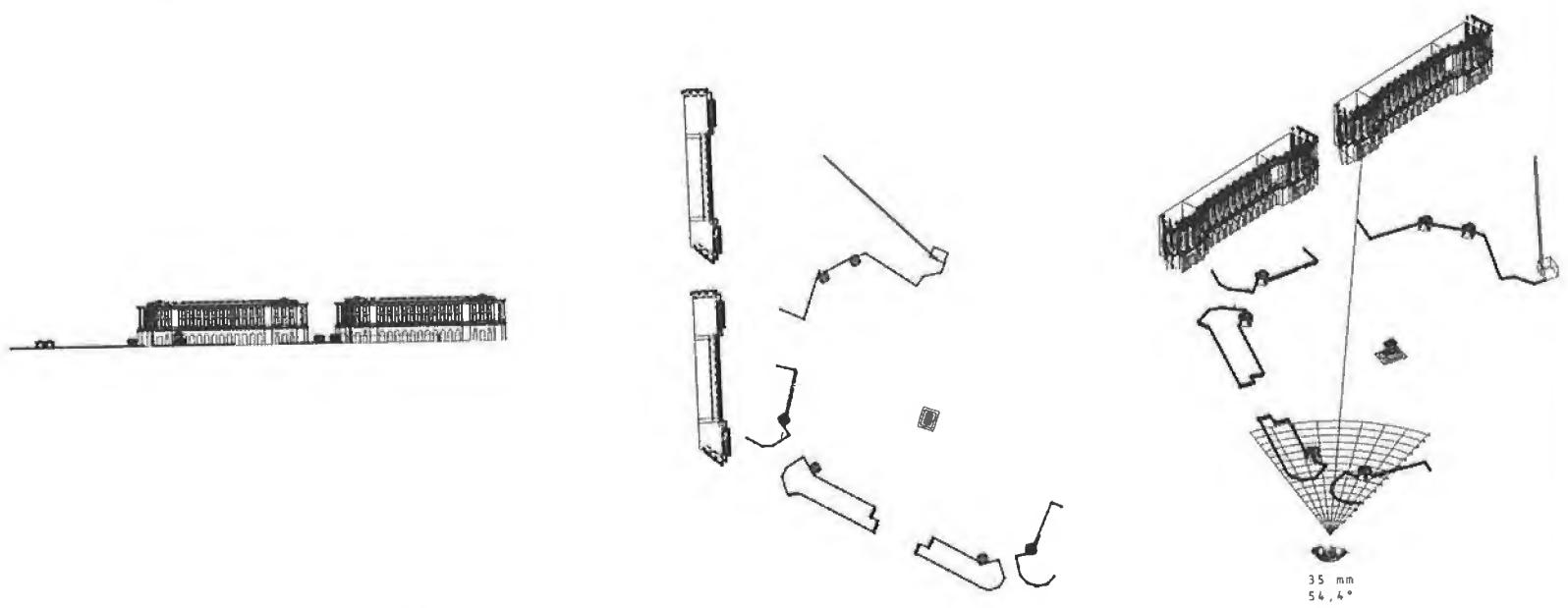


Rue de Miromesnil. View towards the north, day (50mm focus).

Rue de Miromesnil. View towards the north, night (50mm focus).









seen from this dubious spot where, as Jacques Reda says somewhere 'in the mud and the long grass the paving stones ceased'.

The scenario demanded that we represent this place by day, by evening and by night, but also at intervals of several months. These different times, cyclical and linear, can be seen not only in the changing light of the views, but also by certain transformations. Opposite the hôtel, a scaffold replaces a simple fence. Time merges the city with the story. The shots and reverse shots of the courtyard emphasize the encounter between the hôtel and its communes. Two very different views of the city are represented: one high and retreating, the other right on the street.

In the film, Grace is watched by her cook who, installed in front of the porch, controls her comings and goings. The theme of surveillance and control can also be found at the two extremes of the north-south route. In rue de Lancry, for example, it is the inhabitants of the building, not, as one might expect, the visitors, who mistrust the concierge. The door (which has since disappeared) at the gate from Ledoux to Vaugirard, used by Grace to go from Paris to Meudon, increases this device on the scale of the city. These pictures show us Paris of the Revolution as an enclosed and guarded place, itself composed of many smaller places that are equally enclosed and guarded. It is a place from which one

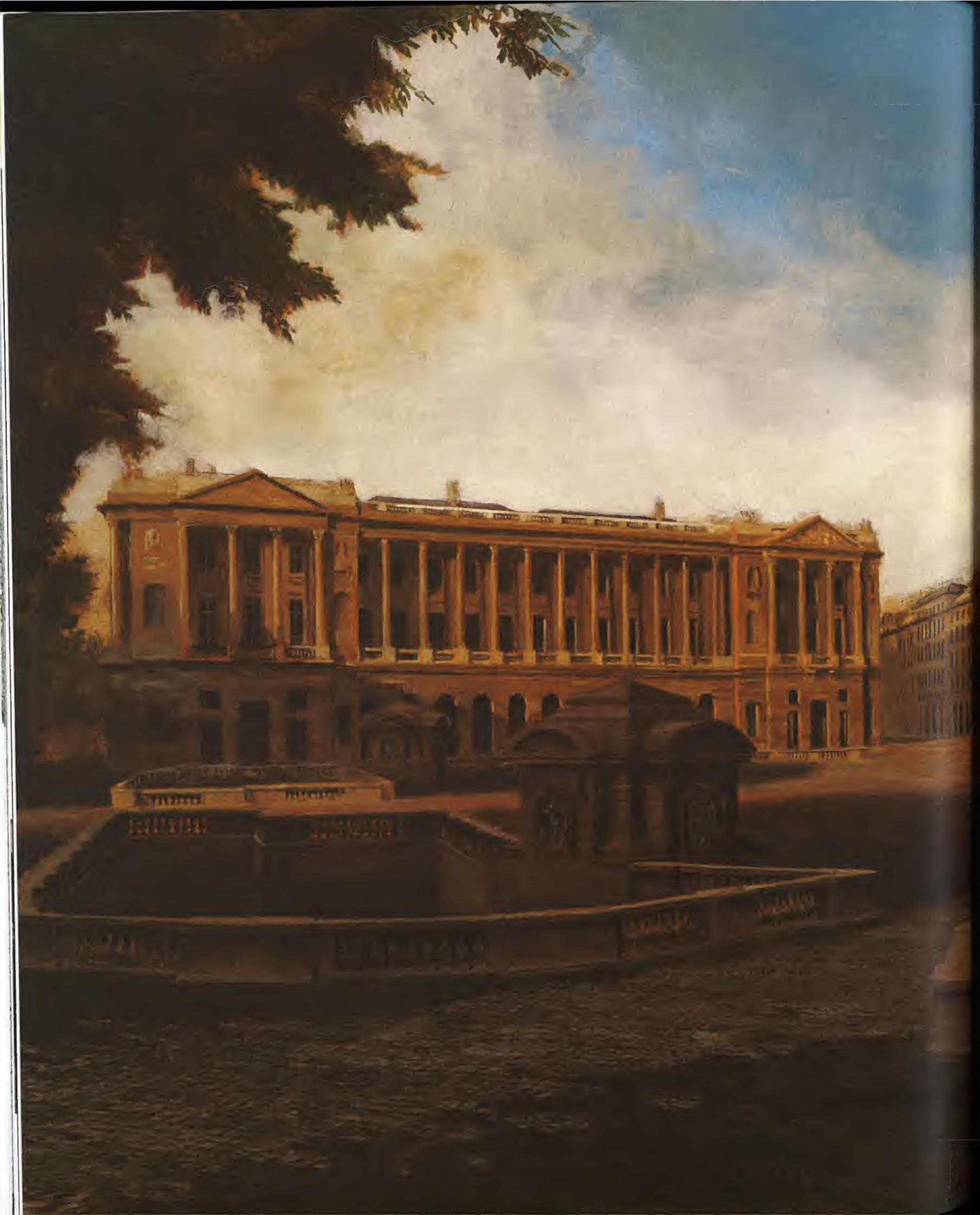
can only escape furtively, through a crack in the surrounding wall.

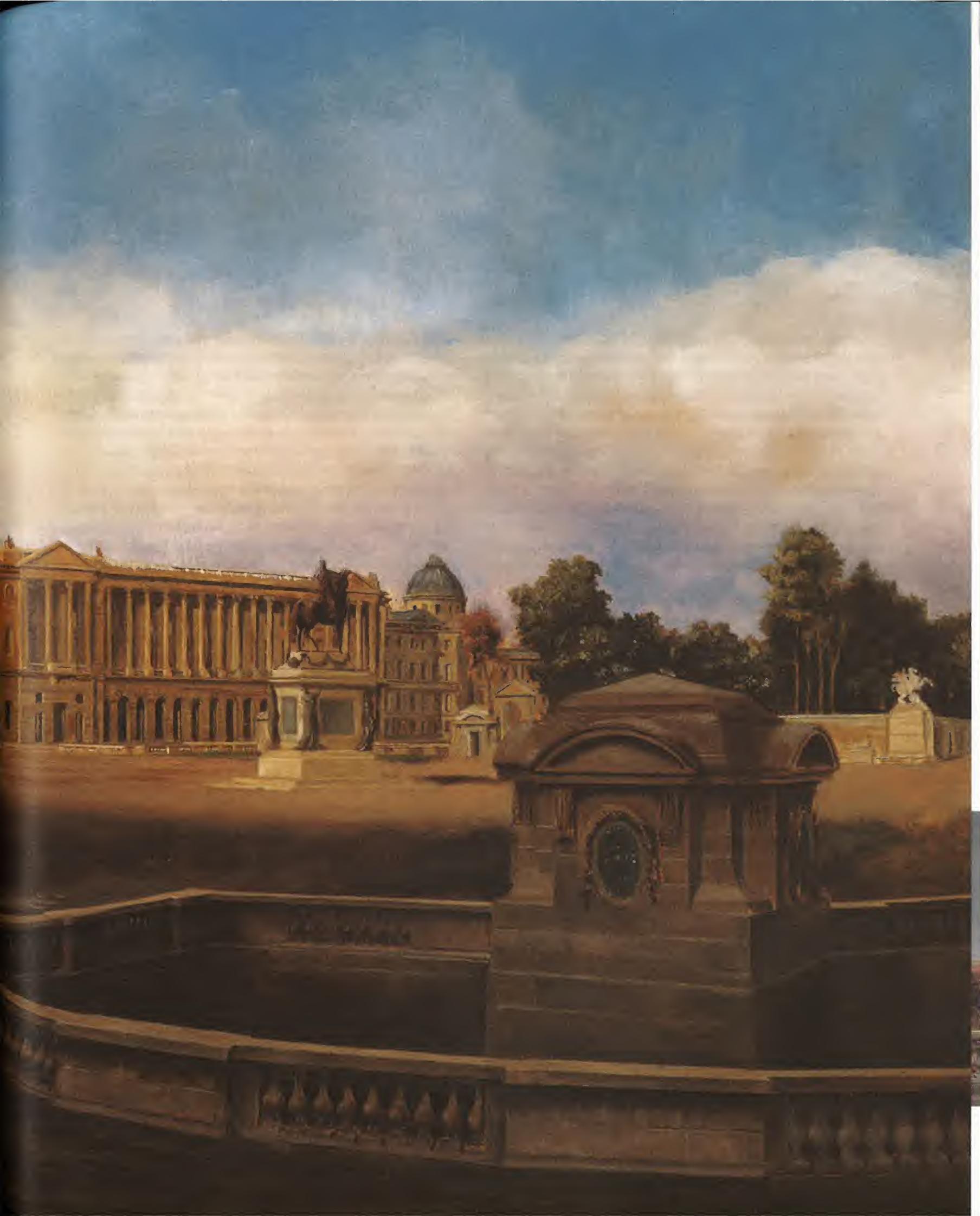
The immobility of the picture frame leads to a scenography that is devised from the point of view of the ideal spectator, as it would be at the theatre. The only difference is that in the exterior shots of the film the actions are brief and the set changes instantaneous. Consequently the composition of all these views, and in particular that of the porches at night, has been conceived so that the spectator immediately understands everyone's position and their field of vision. It was a matter of producing frames which could deal with the geometry of people's gazes and glances, and with their bodies. One sees this, for example, in Hopper's paintings.

Rohmer's demand for historic accuracy had the effect of making the exterior scenes easier to understand for the spectator. It was necessary for the audience to be able to place *The Lady and the Duke* in the 1790s, just as they would know, from the details of the street landscape, if a film about Paris was from the 1980s or the 1990s. Therefore, we not only set about gathering information to find the views that would have represented the places where the action was supposed to take place (and which rarely exist today), but also, and perhaps more importantly, we looked for more general information that might be useful to us: what kind



This page and facing page: studies for the place Louis XV.





of street lamps were used at the time? Were there pavements in rue de Miromesnil? What was the weather like on a particular day at a particular time? Rohmer pushed this need for precision to such an extent that he consulted an astronomical almanac to position the moon at the correct height in the skies, which he finally superimposed on the pictures at the post-production stage (along with the waters of the Seine). Thanks to this information, the paintings that show the Pont Saint-Michel (below left) and the Pont-au-Change, which were inspired by those of Corot and chosen by Rohmer, have been pictorially pre-dated by half a century. But this search for verisimilitude had other implications with regard to the framing and composition of the paintings. The view of boulevard Saint-Denis, for example, shows us the unchanging route of popular marches from a point of view which, today, could be that of a journalist posted on the roof of a bus shelter. The use of a wide-angle lens would have enabled us to include the whole crossroads of Porte Saint-Denis, but it would also have destroyed the perspective, and the protestors would have advanced with giant steps from the background to the foreground. To make the rhythm of the procession appear realistic, a focal length of 50mm was used, with the inconvenience that this reduced the field of vision and no longer allowed the door (from which Grace's car-

riage emerges) and rue Saint-Denis to be seen in one glance. Therefore I artificially concentrated the elements that were essential to the scene in order that they would all appear in a single scene. In the same way, for the picture of the église des Carmes (below right) I continued a sketch of Rohmer's that did not correspond to any photographic shot that one could have taken on the spot. He had instinctively shifted and pivoted the church so that its façade fitted in the opening of the gateway. Painting is not restricted by its frame in the same way as photography.

To represent a space as big as place Louis XV (now place de la Concorde; see pp. 144–5) on a fixed plane, you can either use a fish-eye lens, which deforms the image, or a wide-angle lens which changes its format. The alternative to this consists of choosing a viewpoint which is compatible with the format and the perspective of the film and gathering together the elements of the square, a bit like taking a family photo. Here, the aim is not to make a pretty picture, but to make the place more quickly recognizable, while adapting it to the scenography. Consequently, the plan of the square is modified into the shape of a lozenge (see pp. 142–3). This transformation allows one to suck into the square, as if through a funnel, and without optical deformation, almost all of the landmarks that make up the scene: the two



*Pont Saint-Michel. View towards the east (undefined focus).*



*Rue de Vaugirard. View towards the église des Carmes (35mm focus).*

façades by Gabriel, the statue of the king, the horses of Marly (now at the entrance to the Tuileries), and the drainage ditch that surrounded the square. Several painters have practised this manipulation of space. (I am thinking of the 'reforming views' of Venice in which Canaletto, although famous for his rigorous perspectives, moved the monuments in order to improve his compositions.) In fact, memory itself works in this way, recomposing the many experiences of a place into a single image. For the painting of place Louis XV and following on from the previous scene in the film, I first made a sketch from memory and from what I knew of the history of the place. Then we simply rationalized and clarified this sketch, using a computer to model the represented space, to draw its plan and to determine the exact position of the camera. Indeed, it was necessary to do this for each painting as we were required to give a plan to the studio and precise instructions to the actors and the set builders (who built the stairs, etc.), to prevent the actors from walking in the air or from walking through the walls like ghosts.

There is a certain link between this view of place Louis XV, which occurs at the beginning of the film, and the view of Paris from the terrace at Meudon which comes towards the end of the film, on the day that Louis XVI is decapitated in this same square.

The two views fit almost exactly into the same line of vision, as if the second was obtained by a zoom lens several kilometers behind the first. What is more, it is with the help of a long view that Grace's servant can describe this event to her, which she herself does not want to see. By this subtle artifice Rohmer transforms this panoramic landscape into a heavily charged history painting. It is amusing to note here that it is exactly on the ruins of the Château of Meudon, which appears in the film, that the famous observatory will be built, a century later. In this view of Paris from Meudon, as in that of the Seine from the Pont Louis XVI, the landscape has been somewhat simplified. While the topography and the effect of overhanging are accentuated, the medial space of the suburb is relatively free of buildings and confined to a plan. There, too, it is a case not only of favouring a quick understanding of the space shown, but also of implementing this visualization of the landscape: its restoration through the use of an active memory that can make selections.

The pictures are, therefore, the result of an operation of manipulating reality, which places them between the photographs of Marville and a metaphysical street by de Chirico. I like to look at them as mental views which one could go and paint in the middle of Verniquet's maps.



Boulevard Saint-Denis. View towards the east (35mm focus).

Terrace at Meudon. View towards the east, winter (50mm focus).

# Tear Sheet

*Harry Mathews*

Justice has been done, said the occupied girl, withdrawing an ice-pick from the neck of the occupant. Elsewhere interpretations differ: does equality mean equal right, or one law for all? If that is the case, who should pay?

As she stepped out of the shower, her foot slipped an inch to one side.

Through the plate-glass window of a café he watched a man pick up his order: a hot dog, slipped into a cylinder of bread previously impaled on a hot spike. Mild hunger briefly warmed his throat.

He knew the places where he had lived: the modest suburb of a regional capital and, summers, his grandmother's farm. He knew the places where he wanted to live: a tree-lined street in the national capital and, off-seasons, Cap D'Antibes, if it was still there. The chicken factory had been sited on the drained swamp. Mail arrived with gratifying promptness because sorting and delivery were awarded as prizes to schoolchildren. The roof of the volley-ball court could not be reached even when he smashed the ball straight upwards with all his might, into the darkness from which no sound returned, only the ball.

Yesterday someone had questioned him about the availability of land past the city limits, enough for a five-room house and a garden plot.

If only he had known! Not so long ago it would have been easy to claim a chunk of the market, not in rolled glass, of course, but in something like fibrous-rooted begonias. Then dreams could have come true. His favourite dream was a gift to the community: sun conditioning, or optical fibre galore. In the walls of every building in town, little or big, he would have installed thousands of yards of optical-fibre rods that could bend light and conduct it, piping sunshine into the last windowless or buried space. Tanned faces and camellias burgeoning in workshops, in partitioned offices, in underground hobby-rooms! Sunlight in staircases, in emergency stairwells, in the rest-rooms of movie theatres, in low-ceilinged corridors where eight doors face eight other doors, in police-station cells, in bakery basements with their steel ovens and dusted walls, in the depths of banks where

massive doors are clamped shut. Sunlight in the work pits of garages when encrusted metal roofs them, sunlight in the backrooms of shops – key shops, shirt shops, shoe-repair shops, bicycle shops, computer shops, antique shops, household-appliance shops. Sunlight in rooms where desk lamps, lipstick holders, or spiral notebooks are assembled by indefatigable hands; in the hotel bar between the lobby and the dining area; in the emergency wards strewn with blood-reddened lint. Sunlight in elevators. He remembered outside elevators on turn-of-the-century buildings in his hometown, rising and descending through the day as though the work of construction had never ended.

Down the avenue, his umbrella sailing above those around him, he walked past a beautician's, a travel agency, a bank, and his own real-estate office. Along the back walls of the warmly lighted interiors an uninterrupted landscape displayed haunting colours: spruce-covered slopes reflected in a sky-blue lake; the beaches of Ceylon; on one of the town's squares, children riding a merry-go-round; Versailles. He crossed a neighbourhood of shops, then several blocks of middle- to low-priced, ten- to twelve-storey housing until, via the underpass, he reached the bus depot.

She was waiting in the cafeteria. In her impeccable uniform she shook him with freshened yearning. He had walked through the chilling rain to develop his sadness.

That morning she had learned where she'd been posted. The bus would take her to the airport. She kissed the palms of Walt Maltmall's hands and told him to keep quiet. Before she stepped onto the bus, he realized that if the sun were shining they would cast a single shadow across the asphalt.

The bus will take her south out of town, past the detached and the semi-detached, past the shopping centre and its prodigiously flourishing conifers, past the soccer fields, past the white sign enamelled with the town's ancient name (now inscribed in her forever), at whose very foot a tractor track swerves in a rounded right-angle turn away into the sodden vastness.

He himself had nowhere to go. He was already there.

*Jacques Roubaud*

# A Few Poems

*Translated from the French by Ian Monk*

## Number Plate Portrait of Paris 1992

February, rue Soufflot	903 JTJ 75
29/04	48 JWW
" rue Clément Marot	253 JWX
05/05 rue de Parme	848 JYW
06/05 Opéra	485 JWZ
07/05 rue de Douai	311 JXJ
13/05 rue de Clichy	688 JXJ
16/05 Trinité	336 JXK
17/05 Franklin-Roosevelt	182 JXM
04/06 rue Marx-Dormoy	479 JXY
06/06 Saint Lazare	362 JXZ
" rue du Havre	730 JYF
15/06 rue de Clichy	407 JYX
04/07 ?	653 JZC
12/07 ?	219 JZF
16/07 Trinité	851 JZG
17/07 Bd Saint-Martin	754 JZM
19/07 Beaubourg	571 JZP
20/07 Place de l'Europe	867 JZR
10/08 Champs-Elysées	939 JZR
11/08 Gare de Lyon	146 JZW
13/08 Pont Royal	263 KAF
09/08 rue Lepic	4165 WK 75

## A little sociology

158 male saints, 33 female saints,

some popes, 8 cardinals, 11 abbots, 3 abbesses, 1 canoness, 1 vicar,

some priests, some preachers,

some capuchins & some carmelites, some celestines, some recollects,

some ursulines, some franciscans,

1 commander,

some princes, 3 dauphines, 1 princess, 6 counts, 1 countess,

some knights, some squires,

1 Lord

4 presidents,

8 marshals, 64 generals, at least 14 colonels, 2 lieutenant-colonels,

3 commandants, 8 captains, 4 lieutenants, 2 sergeant-majors, 1 corporal,

some arquebusiers,

some admirals

1 agent

over 3 judges

1 banker, some contractors, some goldsmiths,

only 1 slave trader,

at least 41 doctors,

some bakers, some bons-vivants, 2 butchers

some coal merchants, 1 falconer, some farmers, fishmongers, gardeners,

1 glazier, some gleemen

1 hay carrier, some hunters, lime-burners, market gardeners, millers

1 pancake maker, 1 postman, 1 potter

2 reapers, some shepherds & two shepherdesses, some stevedores,

1 vat maker, some vinegar merchants, some watermen,

4 professors,

some painters, some poets,

what an odd, odd distribution

of the population

in the streets

of Paris

## It's snowing!

Rue d'	Aix
Rue	Abel
Rue	Viète
Rue	Couche
Rue	Achille
Rue	Coriolis
Rue	Condorcet
Rue d'	Alexandrie
Rue des	Haudriettes
Rue	Bassompierre
Rue	Chateaubriand
Rue de	Constantinople
Rue de	Bouainvilliers

## The snow's melting!

Rue de	Bouainvilliers
Rue de	Bretonvilliers
Rue de la	Parcheminerie
Rue	Vauvenargues
Rue de	Steinkerque
Rue	Garancière
Rue des	Alouettes
Rue d'	Alembert
Rue	Laplace
Rue	Albert
Rue	Vilin
Rue	Rude
Cour du	Coq

## L'heure

l'heure du réveil des habitants du passage de la reine de hongrie  
l'heure de l'ouverture du café de la rue du moulin de la pointe  
l'heure du ramassage des poubelles de la rue du sommet des alpes  
l'heure de l'ouverture de la boulangerie de la rue du roi de sicile  
l'heure de l'extinction des réverbères de la rue du pot de fer  
l'heure de l'ouverture de la boucherie de la rue du faubourg du temple  
l'heure du lever des enfants de la rue de la poterne des peupliers  
l'heure de l'ouverture de la charcuterie de la rue du moulin des prés  
l'heure de la promenade des chiens de l'avenue de la porte de pantin  
l'heure de l'ouverture de la maternelle de la rue de la pointe d'ivry  
l'heure du nettoyage des caniveaux de la rue des nonnains d'hyères  
l'heure de l'ouverture du garage de la rue du val de grace  
l'heure de la désinvolture des chats de la rue du père teilhard de chardin  
l'heure de l'ouverture de l'auto-école du boulevard des filles du calvaire  
l'heure du roucoulement des tourterelles de la rue du moulin de la vierge  
l'heure de l'ouverture de la bonneterie de la galerie des marchands de la gare saint-lazare  
l'heure de l'invasion des voitures de l'avenue de la porte d'orleans  
l'heure de l'ouverture de l'école de l'avenue de la porte de champerret  
l'heure du ronflement des moteurs de l'avenue de la porte d'italie  
l'heure de l'ouverture de l'opticien de la rue du pas de la mule  
l'heure de l'ouverture de la mission de la rue du pont de lodi  
l'heure de l'ouverture des bibliothèques de la rue de l'école de médecine  
l'heure de l'ouverture de la librairie de la rue du champ de mars  
l'heure de l'ouverture de l'église de la place d'estienne d'orves  
l'heure de l'ouverture de la brasserie de la rue du château d'eau  
l'heure de l'ouverture de l'électricien de la rue patrice de la tour du pin  
l'heure de l'ouverture du salon de coiffure de la rue des colonnes du trône  
l'heure de l'ouverture du fleuriste de l'avenue de la porte de montrouge  
l'heure de l'ouverture de la cordonnerie de la rue du dessous des berges  
l'heure de l'ouverture de la bijouterie de la place de la porte de saint-cloud  
l'heure de l'ouverture du restaurant de l'avenue de la porte de clichy

l'heure de l'ouverture de l'imprimerie de la rue de la cour des noues  
l'heure de l'ouverture de l'héliport de l'avenue de la porte de sèvres  
l'heure de l'ouverture de l'église de la rue du chevalier de la barre  
l'heure de l'ouverture de l'hôpital de la rue de la porte d'aubervilliers  
l'heure de l'ouverture des pompes funèbres de l'avenue de la porte de clignancourt  
l'heure du bain des moineaux de la ruelle du soleil d'or  
l'heure de la récréation des écoliers de la rue du val de marne

l'heure de l'asphyxie des piétons de l'avenue de la porte de vitry  
l'heure de l'asphyxie des chiens de l'avenue de la porte de choisy  
l'heure de l'asphyxie des chats de l'avenue de la porte d'ivry  
l'heure de l'asphyxie des moineaux de l'avenue de la porte de gentilly  
l'heure de l'asphyxie des enfants de l'avenue de la porte de vanves  
l'heure de l'asphyxie des laitues de l'avenue de la porte de la plaine  
l'heure de l'asphyxie des marronniers de l'avenue de la porte d'issy  
l'heure de l'asphyxie des automobilistes de l'avenue de la porte d'auteuil  
l'heure de l'eaphyxie des moterds de l'avenue du parc de passy  
l'heure de l'asphyxie des rugbymen de l'avenue du parc des princes  
l'heure de l'asphyxie des cyclistes de l'avenue de la porte des ternes  
l'heure de l'asphyxie des violettes en pot de l'avenue de la porte d'asnières  
l'heure de l'asphyxie des géraniums de l'avenue de la porte de la chapelle  
l'heure de l'asphyxie des lilas de l'avenue de la porte des lilas

l'heure de l'allongement des ombres de la rue du maréchal franchet d'esperet  
l'heure de la fermeture de la chapelle de l'avenue de la porte de vincennes  
l'heure de l'envol des pigeons de la place de la porte de versailles  
l'heure de la fermeture du café de la rue du roi d'alger  
l'heure de l'allumage des réverbères de la place de la porte de passy  
l'heure de l'invisibilité des chats de la rue du bois de boulogne  
l'heure du sommeil des habitants de la rue du parc de charonne

l'heure du souvenir de la disparition de la rue du moulin de beurre

## The Gioconda

To see la Gioconda  
real lovers of art  
don't seek the wide-blue yonder  
or even the Louvre

They go to the corner of rue  
de la Rochefoucauld and of rue  
Notre Dame  
de Lorette  
they go inside the café  
which is there

The painting's on the wall  
beige and cream  
its frame is beige and cream and slightly orange  
the painting is signed  
by the artist's own hand  
E.  
Mérou.  
It's La Gioconda  
La Gioconda by Mérou.

Emile Mérou? Eugène Mérou? Ernest Mérou?  
or why not Emilie, Eugénie, Ernestine?  
who on earth knows?

behind her spotless glass  
La Gioconda looks pleased  
she stares at me  
she smiles  
without the slightest condescension  
not a jot of mystery  
placidness  
calm  
beautiful

La Gioconda, in fact!

Real lovers of art  
don't seek the wide-blue yonder  
or night clubs with Bridget Fonda  
the jungles of the anaconda  
or the island home of the honda  
nor peru  
but down the road from the sacred heart  
they come and see La Gioconda  
La Gioconda La Gioconda  
La Gioconda by Mérou

So let's  
cele cele  
brate La Gioconda  
lagiocondabymérou!

de

no one says 'Place de Clichy'  
no one says 'Rue Clichy'

## Sacré-Coeur!

Sacré-Coeur!  
I can see you  
O Baby's Bottle  
With your big cross-shaped teat

Sacré-Coeur!  
you're seven baby's bottles!  
I can see you all clearly from the bottom of the slope  
on square Saint-Pierre  
three small bottles  
three middle-sized bottles  
and one big one

In the evening  
the glory of the sky splits open  
so that the angels can come and suck  
three small bottles  
three middle-sized bottles

But you  
big bottle  
you're for Baby Jesus  
ah!  
let's hope he doesn't hurt his lips  
on your cross-shaped teat

## Registration dream

Mr Goodman got out of the car  
in front of a jelly shop  
or a marmelade emporium

The car's plate read  
317 JAM 75

The car pulled off  
into a massive gridlock  
in which all the vehicles had on their number plates  
these three letters

JAM

## Rue d'Amsterdam

Rue d'Amsterdam proceeds down and then up  
Up and then down again proceeds my street  
I go up or go down rue d'Amsterdam  
I go down or I go up Amsterdam's street

They say you go down they say you go up  
Streets that are downward or else upward streets  
Then they say it of streets which hesitate  
And they say it of the flattest of streets

You go up a street on its macadam  
Or on its pavement you go down the street  
And so I go down my rue d'Amsterdam  
And so I go up my Amsterdam's street

So what in fact goes down and what goes up  
Whether things go down or not in the street?  
Is it the houses which climb up and up  
Or tumble towards the end of the street?

For with houses you see by the numbers  
They have on their doors along side the street  
When the street goes down so do the numbers  
And numbers go up when up goes the street

But why do we say that numbers go up  
Climbing from zero to the infinite?  
Because numbers make a street of numbers  
The street of integers longer than night

The high street of numbers is ever so long  
An abstracted high street which never ends  
You go up and down you count and recount  
At night all numbers can be foes or friends

But maybe our streets are merely embers  
The embers of numbers dropped by the rain  
Just tiny scraps of the street of numbers  
Which ever we go up and down again

## Pont Mirabeau

Under pont Mirabeau runs the Y-onne\*

And our love

Must I remember agonie

Joy always came after the ponne.

\* When two watercourses with different names\*\* meet,  
the watercourse resulting from their junction takes the name of the  
watercourse with the largest flow of water at the moment when  
they join. According to the most recent measurements, the river  
in Paris called the Seine should be called the Yonne.

\*\* If they have the same name (which is rare), they keep it.

## kitty o'shea's

now that I'm learning to drink  
in preparation for my approaching  
retirement

sometimes  
in the afternoon  
I go to 'kitty o'shea's'  
I order  
"a pint of guinness, please"

I sit with a book  
in english  
and stay there an hour  
alone  
slowly drinking and reading  
sip after sip  
the cool black bitter tar

kitty o'shea's is a pub with an irish name  
in the centre of paris  
a stone's throw from the tuileries  
and yet  
I imagine I'm in london  
as good a way as any  
of not being in the town  
where I live

## The Streets of Paris

The streets of Paris have two sides

As a rule

There are no streets in Paris with no sides

(it is in fact hard to imagine how a street in Paris (or anywhere else) could have no sides)

There's not a single street in Paris with one single side

(it is in fact hard to imagine how a street in Paris (or anywhere else) could have one single side)

and it would be difficult for a street in Paris to have three sides

a street in Paris could easily have four sides

You would just have to build houses in the middle of a normal street with two sides

but no one does

and so

the streets of Paris have two sides

the streets of Paris have houses on both sides

as a rule

if a street in Paris doesn't have houses on one side

and if on this side there is the Seine

then it isn't a street, but a quay

rue de Médicis doesn't have houses on the side it shares with the Jardin du Luxembourg

nor does rue de Lutèce (on the side next to the Arènes de Lutèce)

or rue Cuvier alongside the Jardin des Plantes

in this case

like Gautama in the Nyaya-sutra we would say that the street has non-houses on its side without houses

and that these non-houses are characterised by the non-presence of houses

on this side of the street

which is clearly not a negative observation

just as the absence of noise is quite simply

a positive observation of silence

and if a street in Paris doesn't have houses on either side

then there are non-houses on each side of the street

the streets of Paris have a left side and a right side

like us

the left side of a street in Paris is the one where the odd numbers of the houses go up on your left when  
out walking

the right side of a street in Paris is the one where the numbers of the houses go up on your right when  
out walking

as a rule

(when out walking in the streets of Paris I check to see if this condition has been satisfied

(a condition which would not be valid for the houses in the town of Reus in Catalonia

where the opposite applies

as good a way as any for this town to affirm its uniqueness

(in Caunes-Minervois there is a single series of numbers for all the houses in the town  
and so none of its streets has a left side or a right side

(if all the houses in Caunes-Minervois were transported brick by brick to California and if they were  
then arranged in numerical order a new town would be obtained called Caunes-Minervois (Cal.) which  
would have just one street with just one side; and that without having to suppose a strange topology such  
as the Möbius strip

(if transport was too expensive, facsimiles of the houses could quite simply be built as was done with the  
Parthenon in Nashville. And, as in Nashville, where the missing statutes on the frieze of the Parthenon  
have been reconstructed so that the copy is more authentic than what is left of the original, nothing  
would prevent them from replacing the missing tiles on the roofs of the models of the houses of Caunes-  
Minervois (Cal.)

(and even add things on if people wanted a patio in front or a pool behind

(because in the end all that matters is the number of the house

(but unfortunately it would not be possible to place a strip of asphalt in front of the houses, because the  
street would then have a second side))))))

and if a street in Paris did have numbers only on one side

then depending on whether they were odd or even the side would be the left (or the right)

and the non-houses on the other side would all have the absence of numbers which would be odd if they  
were on the left side and even in the opposite case

I admit that streets without houses

and streets with houses without numbers

preoccupy me

but I'm stopping this poem here because of its length

despite there being so much more to be said about the streets of Paris

## Perec's 17 extreme experiences

- 1 Perec declaiming *Erec* by Chrétien de Troyes on Mount Peleus
- 2 Perec deplored the *perdition* of his antique wardrobe now a *wreck*
- 3 Perec, forced to read General Peron's speeches, crying out : 'Heck what a twat!'
- 4 Perec, forced to read the works of Delly in Péronne, crying out : 'Heck what a twot!'
- 5 Perec operating Oulipian transformations on the works of Eco
- 6 Perec fishing up a *cheque* from the Seine in the mouth of a *perch*
- 7 Perec remarking: "the new world order means my dialect can't *perdure*"
- 8 Perec realising he must constantly *express* himself or *perish*
- 9 Perec *perusing* the screen *exhibiting* his words
- 10 Perec remembering those which *perforated* him before a reproduction of Van Eyck
- 11 Perec calmly appreciating the *performance* of master Eckhart
- 12 Perec wanting to pay a thousand *ecus* for a date with Isabelle Huppert
- 13 Perec regretting yesterday's roses' *perfume* as thunder *echoes*
- 14 Perec cheekily asking for *permission* to go to Mecca
- 14 Perec's modest admiration for the *exploits* of Perseus
- 15 Perec putting into a casket a *necklace* belonging to Jeanne Perrin
- 16 Perec chopping *aperitif* olives with some *silex*
- 17 Perec carefully evaluating the area of boulevard Pereire in *hectares*

# Inventory of the Future

*Julian Green*

What will Paris be like tomorrow? The thought was in my mind as, strolling beside the Seine in the mist, I contemplated the glory of the buds that covered the trees with a delicate veil. Paris possesses a beauty that alarms me at times because I feel it is fragile, under threat. Mainly from our town planners. Which young architect is at last going to give us the city of the future, a fine city capable of appealing to the generations to come as we have been enchanted by the Paris that has been fashioned slowly by the centuries? Is it too much to dream of a visionary who will be the poet of space and no longer one of those organizers of a life uglified, to paraphrase Baudelaire, one of those beaters of wasted space who erect modern apartment buildings as graceless cubes, full of the sound and fury of the neighbours' television sets and plumbing facilities...

A certain amount of destruction is inevitable; we cannot be forever moaning about what is gone. But time should have taught us not to go on stupidly protecting what was made not to last, all those houses put up a hundred years ago and now being patched up in parts of the Marais and around the faubourg Saint-Antoine.

On the threshold of the twenty-first century, we are living with the most antiquated ideas, particularly as regards how to build cities. It is not a question of getting rid of the past but rather one of using it like a memory, and the inventory that the future draws up will be mainly that of all the beauty that has been given to us down the generations since the first stone cut by man.

Space and nature – it always comes back to that. And modern architecture cannot content itself with narrow-minded principles such as are having Paris rebuilt in bits and pieces, Les Halles here, Montparnasse or the fifteenth district there, with no overall view, no thought of tomorrow. There have always been visionaries, and the 'architect's dream' of Thomas Cole matches the dreams of Soane, Loos, or Klenze of an ideal London, Vienna, or Munich. Jefferson went further: he built what he had dreamed

– the University of Virginia, where I completed my studies. The great French creators, however, people like Ledoux, Boullée, Le Corbusier, were not lucky enough to see their visions become reality, and what they did manage to build our city fathers contrived to put to rights. Boullée's programmes and basilica, mausoleum, and theatre projects, Ledoux's plans for town houses, public places, and districts for craft-tradesmen hardly ever progressed further than the drawings that we admire in museum boxes. And our century exhibits the same suspicion. How many Sarcelles for one Brazilia!

Since the time when I was born in the seventeenth district, near the porte des Ternes, after wars and the years of exile, even after each of the trips that have taken me almost everywhere I wished to go, I have returned to my native city to feel the same rush of wonder every time. I can see it changing. You would think those responsible were contemplating the future with their telescopes turned round the wrong way. What is the beauty of skies to them, or trees, or all the things that put gladness in the eyes of passers-by...

A thousand years from now, perhaps, a man will stand as I am standing behind a windowpane and look as I am looking at this landscape of houses behind trees and this sky scattering spring rain. I try to imagine having crossed that great space of time and being that man. What is he thinking about? Is he happy? Does he sometimes wonder what he is doing on this earth and why at one period rather than another? What does he believe? What can he see? This same curiosity that he arouses in me, others had about us before they passed away in the days when Lutetia was first emerging from the mud. Maybe on this very spot where I am standing a Barbarian mused about the men that were to come. And here am I, dreaming of that Paris of the future, raised up on the space that is now ours, where shuttered concrete, glass, steel, and possibly other materials as yet unknown will be the ingredients of a limitless beauty.

# Reviews



# Restless Writing

## The Work of W. G. Sebald

William Firebrace

*W. G. Sebald died on 14 December 2001. Curiously for someone who wrote so much about travelling by train and on foot, he is reported as having died in a car crash. This sad news reached me as I was typing in the final words of this article.*



london. drizzle and fog. a large room, octagonal in plan, high ceiling. on the floor, timber boarding of unequal widths. big windows with the square glass panels. arranged around the room, some astronomical instruments. two men stand beside one of the windows, one talking earnestly, the other listening.

Things may seem confused. Almost without order. Perhaps wrongly remembered. Just keep walking. Easily and without too much concern. In some direction or other. Everything will fall into place.

There is a moment in W. G. Sebald's most recent book, *Austerlitz*, when the narrator and Austerlitz, the latter a writer on the history of architecture (or at least a writer who is always about to write on the history of architecture), visit the Greenwich Observatory. Austerlitz, who tends to speak with a precise and detailed conviction on any number of themes – while, on the whole,

the narrator wisely remains silent – comments on the nature of time:

'Time... is of all our discoveries by far the most artificial, and in its connection to the planets turning on their axes, is no less arbitrary than a calculation based on the growth of trees or the period in which limestone decays... If Newton was of the opinion, said Austerlitz and indicated through the window out at the curve of the water which encircled the so-called Isle of Dogs, flowing in the last light of the day, if Newton was of the opinion that time is a river like the Thames, then where is the source of time and into which sea does it finally flow? Every river is, as we know, necessarily confined at each side. What however would be, if considered in this way, the banks of time? What would be the particular qualities that correspond to the water, which is flowing so heavily and powerfully. In what way can be distinguished those things which are within the water from those which are not influenced by it?... Why does time stand eternally still and dead in some places and rush on in others?'

If we assume, for one long moment, that Austerlitz's comments – that the measurement of time is arbitrary, that time is not constant and has not even a constant direction, that it might have currents, eddies and dead zones – are valid, then we also require a corresponding understanding of the relationship between things and events in time. This relationship would not be merely one in which things and events stand in line, one after another, it would be altogether more complex. And it is just such an undefined notion that informs W. G. Sebald's writing and that makes itself felt through the sensation of geography and space as uncertain, since these too are governed by a notion of time. The reader repeatedly encounters displaced people, shifting identities, landscapes of uncertain location, buildings that have no understandable form or size, coincidences, arbitrary

links, and false memories. One factor holds all this swirling uncertainty together, the character of the narrator, and the pattern of his movements.

wales. cloudy, sea breeze, about to rain. a rambling country house, rather decayed. a series of large rooms. the floors lined with linoleum, worn away in patches, particularly beside the walls, as if someone has been walking up and down beside the wall. the rooms filled with the cases of a natural history collection, boxes of insects and stones and eggs and fossils. most are marked with small labels in grey ink. two young men, looking up at the sky.

W. G. Sebald comes from the village of Wertach in the south German Allgäu, in the foothills of the Alps, but has lived most of his adult life in England, firstly in Manchester and then in East Anglia. Four works have been translated into English: *The Emigrants*, which describes the lives of four exiles from Germany, three of them Jewish; *The Rings of Saturn*, a walking tour of parts of Suffolk; *Vertigo*, which relates a journey in four sections through northern Italy, incorporating encounters with Stendhal and Kafka, before ending with a disturbing return visit to the Allgäu; and *Austerlitz*, the story of a man who has lost the memory of his childhood and who tries to rediscover his past in Jewish Prague. In addition, Sebald's works in German include: *Nach der Natur* a prose poem; *Logis in einem Landhaus*, a study of Swiss and south German writers; and *Lufkrieg und Literatur*, a collection of his lectures on the lack of any literary response in Germany to the destruction of German cities as a result of air-raids during the Second World War.

The books are illustrated with black and white, or rather grey photographs, and sometimes with fragments of documents or details of paintings, which give the works the air of factual records,

rather than descriptions of imaginary people and places.

The character of the narrator (a man whose life story appears to be very similar to that of the author, and whose picture in *The Rings of Saturn*, bears a remarkable physical resemblance to W. G. Sebald), is dominated by a vast feeling of melancholy, a permanent soulfulness. It is a melancholy that can be relieved, if only temporarily, by moving on, by visiting some other place, by following some new enquiry.

The books often begin with the narrator, already in a rather distressed state, setting out on some journey. *The Rings of Saturn*, for example, begins: 'In August 1992, when the dog days were drawing to an end, I set off to walk in the county of Suffolk, in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of work.' Similarly, *Austerlitz*: 'In the second half of the 1960s, I travelled several times from England to Belgium, partly for academic reasons and partly for reasons not really clear to myself, sometimes for one or two days, sometimes for several weeks.' And also the second section of *Vertigo*: 'In October 1980 I travelled from England, where I had then been living for nearly twenty-five years in a country which was almost always under grey skies, to Vienna, hoping that a change of place would get me over a particularly difficult period of my life.'

There is a precision in these beginnings – we know the date and place. Indeed, it seems as if, despite the weakened emotional state of the narrator, we are going to be told something definite. But quickly the narratives disintegrate. They enter into abrupt diversions and extended discussions on apparently unrelated subjects: the history of the herring; the life of a minor poet; a visit to a country house; a conversation in some completely different country and time. It is as though the reader has been moved abruptly in a

different direction. But just as he despairs of ever finding the main current of the story again, the narrative finds its former course.

In this respect, the books seem sometimes to be simply collections of narratives, an accumulation of endless detail, extracts from an encyclopaedia with no clear taxonomy. They are like those collections of junk that the narrator encounters in Somerleyton Hall in Suffolk, or the worthless antiques Austerlitz inspects in the Antikos Bazar beside the former labour camp of Theresienstadt. Yet gradually these diversions build up. Patterns are created out of different elements that repeat or are seen again from a different angle. Fragments reflect onto other fragments and a curious whole emerges. Austerlitz, for example, is the name of the character of Jewish Czech origins in Sebald's book, the original name of

Fred Astaire, the name of a man mentioned in Kafka's diaries, a village in Moravia of German and Czech origins (now part of the Czech Republic), a battle fought near that village during the Napoleonic wars (in which the French defeated the Austrians and Russians), and a railway station in Paris (named after the battle) where, during the occupation of France, the Germans collected looted Jewish possessions. The name is also uncomfortably close to that of the most notorious German KZ, Auschwitz. Some of these links are tenuous, merely things, people or places which share a name but are different in nature; others are more deliberate, established through shared intent or action. Together they form the threads of a structure through which some kind of form begins to become apparent.

Sebald notes an extract from the





Brockhaus Encyclopaedia at the beginning of *The Rings of Saturn*: 'The rings of Saturn consist of ice crystals, and probably meteorite particles describing circular orbits around the planet's equator. In all likelihood these are fragments of a former moon that was too close to the planet and was destroyed by its tidal effect.' The planet Saturn takes its name from the Roman god of melancholy and of time, the fallen ruler of the old order. Sebald's books are in part an attempt to examine the fragments and particles we live amongst and to project some type of original body that they may have once made up. This body may have really existed or may be created through the construction of Sebald's books alone, yet this study remains necessarily fragmented and always frustrated. The author quotes the seventeenth-century Norwich doctor Thomas Browne: 'We study the order of things, but cannot grasp their innermost essence'.

germany. spring, sun just shining. a street in a small town, many of the houses recently constructed. the buildings of brick and timber, with pitched roofs and chimneys. outside each a shiny new car. some women cleaning the pavement with mops and water. neat gardens with small bushes and brightly coloured flowers. one house remains in a bombed-out state, only really a façade. the garden of this house wild and overgrown. somewhere within the garden a small boy, scribbling in a sketchbook.

Many of those who go into exile, whether by choice or by compulsion,

attempt to adapt to the culture of their new land, to learn the language and to write in it, to change their name, to try as far as possible to leave behind their old nationality and identity. The exile leads a life that is forever divided, existing partly in new time, partly in the old. In *The Emigrants* Sebald describes four exiles, each of whom is somehow frustrated by their respective inabilitys to live a completely new life, by the memory of what was formerly home. For example, Dr Selwyn 'confessed (no other word will do) that in recent years he had been beset with homesickness more and more... for many years the images of that exodus had been gone from his memory, but recently, he said, they had been returning again and making their presence felt'.

Sebald too has undergone a type of exile (albeit self-imposed): his chosen home is in East Anglia, and its flat, empty landscape beside the North Sea is as different from his enclosed mountain homeland as can be imagined. His loathing of southern Germany is frequently expressed, particularly at the end of *Vertigo*, where the claustrophobia of village life and the disturbing orderliness of the 'German countryside, which has always been alien to me, straightened out and tidied up as it is to the last square inch and corner,' produce the following effect: 'the words "south-west Germany", "south-west Germany" were running over and over in my mind, till after a couple of hours of mounting irritation I came to the conclusion that something like an eclipse of my mental faculties was about to occur.' Yet, in spite of this, Sebald remains orientated towards his German roots. He writes in German, often on subjects of prime concern to other Germans: about those exiled during the era of National Socialism, about German-speaking writers, about German painters, about the fate of German cities. In an interview with Toby Green, he observes of England

that 'I am not remotely at home here, all I have to do is to get into a taxi at the station and people ask me where I come from'. Sometimes it seems as if Sebald is still in Germany, manufacturing a kind of wished for version of that land out of the material of England, a land that exists in memory alone.

The East Anglian countryside Sebald describes in *The Rings of Saturn* is a type of wasteland. The towns are deserted or falling into the sea, the land is littered with deserted military installations, even the forests have been obliterated by storms. At times it appears as a world that is operating in reverse: as the sea erodes the coastland, the old well-shafts appear momentarily like chimneys, now above rather than beneath the ground. This is no stereotypical English countryside, with its National Trust prettiness, kitchen gardens and charming folksiness. It is not even the contemporary landscape of supermarkets and industrial sheds. It has more in common with the blasted and lonely landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich, with the mud plains of Anselm Kiefer. It is an afterworld, inhabited by ghosts and almost-ghosts, disconnected from the rest of England and linked across the North Sea to the flatlands of Holland and the north German coastline. Sebald's landscape is a labyrinth to become lost in, where the narrator often wanders without any sense of direction, where there is no sense of time because nothing ever happens, or because everything of importance has already happened, and where his wandering will only bring him to some stranded or derelict construction.

In *The Emigrants*, Sebald's descriptions of 1960s Manchester – with its bombed-out zones, its hotels that have seen better days, its Jewish quarter, its artists living in derelict houses, its forlorn canals and industrial weariness – seem better to resemble a German city such as Berlin or Hamburg. Indeed, they more closely resemble a

Berlin or Hamburg that has never been cleaned up and where the inhabitants have long ago moved on. 'When night fell upon those vast spaces, which I came to think of as the Elysian Fields, fires would begin to flicker here and there and children would stand around them or skip about, restless shadowy figures. On that bare terrain, which was always like a glacis around the heart of the city, it was in fact always children that one encountered.' Sebald's Manchester remains unable to move forward in time. As it is demolished by the city planners, it seems to regress, returning from city to landscape.

Sebald's current home, not far from the airfields used by the bombers that took part in the mass raids on Germany during the Second World War, has engendered another reversal. He has located himself at the launch pad of a system of destruction that began in England and ended in Germany. Yet that launch pad is now abandoned while the bombed cities thrive once more.

In 1997 Sebald gave two lectures in Zurich, later published as *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, on the subject of the destruction of German cities and their civilian populations during the Second World War, and the lack of response to this catastrophe among German writers in the postwar years. Some 600,000 civilians died in these raids, 7,500,000 were made homeless and 3,500,000 dwellings were destroyed. Sebald notes the incredible purposelessness of the raids, which had little effect on German industry and did nothing to weaken German war morale. They represent a logic of destruction for its own sake, and, however just the cause may have been, 'war in a pure unconcealed form'.

Yet, Sebald's primary concern is not to question the morality of the raids, but to understand the lack of emotional or intellectual response among the German people in the postwar years. He writes: 'This unprecedented destruction entered into the annals of the

newly reconstructed nation only as vague generalizations, seems to leave behind hardly a trace of pain in the collective consciousness, and remains even now excluded from the retrospective experience of those affected.'

The raids vastly speeded up the effects of time: instead of evolving over centuries cities were eradicated in a matter of hours. In some ways there can be little wonder that the inhabitants

burg. Sebald writes of the need to write 'a natural history of the destruction', an objective study that would try to categorize matters that are hard to categorize – the characteristics of the firestorms and the pathology of the victims – but as he struggles to describe how this might be undertaken he is unable to proceed. The German ruins cannot have the same attraction for Sebald as the romantic ruins of the



were unable to absorb what had happened – they had been thrown into an entirely different and incomprehensible zone of time, suddenly separated from the normal speed of events – but the question remains: why was no effort made at a later date to describe the destruction? There are, after all, descriptions of the destruction of other cities, such as the Fire of London and the burning of St Peters-

English landscape, which have gradually declined rather than being suddenly eradicated. Perhaps it is now too late, the raids have entered into a dead time, the particles of the original event have long been swept into neat piles by orderly citizens and have been properly disposed of by other tidy-minded folk.

Clearly the raids and their effects go very deeply into Sebald's own emotive system, and inform his writing. The



Allied bombing raids destroyed a homeland and all of its inhabitants became, in some way, exiles. Sebald was born in 1944, in an area untouched by the bombing, 'yet even today, if I look at photographs or films of the war, it is as though I am descended from [stammite], so to speak, from the war, and, like many from that time, from these horrors which I have never personally experienced, and from which I can never really emerge'. In *Nach der Natur* the narrator describes how his mother saw the flames of the burning of Nürnberg, and 'even today does not know what the burning city looked like, and what feelings were created by this view'. He continues, 'she travelled to an acquaintance, she expected the worst and became aware that she was pregnant'. Already at the beginning, shortly after his own conception, the cities are burning, true feelings are impossible to recall, and the dizziness and confusion in time has already commenced. He writes too about a childhood visit to the ruins of Munich, 'the word city was always associated for me with heaps of rubble, endwalls and window openings through which one could see the sky'. In a 1999 interview in *Libération*, in which he refers to his gradual acquisition of knowledge about

the events of the war, Sebald states that 'this remained still something abstract, distant, exterior. It was only later, in England, that I could feel the effects of what had been, when I met Germans who had been persecuted by Nazism, and who could tell me about it.' This disturbing ignorance may be the origin of the interest in worlds that have vanished without reason, in constantly seeking to return to some kind of origin, in optimistically trying to reassemble an original from some few remaining parts.

belgium. cold and autumnal. a magnificent waiting room in a train station. tiled walls and floor. large clock on wall. wooden chairs and tables. a few passengers talking vaguely into their mobile phones. trivial euromusic playing in background. an air of boredom and inaction. a man dressed in tweed jacket and grey trousers, taking notes in a small school exercise book.

In *Austerlitz*, the title character describes the goals of his life-long examination of architecture: 'The various projections, which I have made at various times as to the book I will write, range from a many volume work of systematic description to a series of attempts at themes such as hygiene and sanitation, the architecture

of the penal system, profane temples, water cures, zoos, departures and arrivals, light and shadows, steam and gas and other similar matters.' It is an attempt to categorize architecture as a series of abstract themes, freed from the usual obsession with the personality of the architect, almost a type of natural history of architecture. Natural history occurs frequently in Sebald's work as an ideal science that is concerned not only with ordering and classifying the normal but also with the ability to include the exception, the bizarre, the extinct, the excessive, that which grows without control. It is a discipline based on an extended notion of time, measuring in ages rather than days or years. Architecture, considered as a branch of natural history, acquires similar qualities. Its structures may be reexamined and reclassified, buildings that seem to belong to different species become linked.

Sebald is particularly interested in monumental buildings where function has been overtaken by size, such as the Palace of Justice in Brussels, the system of forts beside Antwerp, the Liverpool Street and Austerlitz railway stations, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris or the thermal baths at Marienbad. He describes how these structures grow almost of their own accord, develop cells and organs and spread themselves out over the surrounding land. The forts and defences of Antwerp have grown beyond any relationship to defence, they simply became larger, more complex and more impossible to complete as time went on. They fell easily into the hands of the enemy because there were not enough men to defend the walls. The Palace of Justice is a similarly pharmonic edifice, constructed as though for eternity, filled with corridors leading nowhere, with empty courtyards, with purposeless rooms, and occupied sometimes by parasitic activities in the form of barber shops and other stalls. The Bibliothèque Nationale

has been constructed to achieve the impossible task of housing an unlimited quantity of books, but as a result reading or study becomes impossible. The building becomes a tomb for books, where readers are excluded or treated like suspects. These buildings seem like absurdities of nature, with their own growth patterns, their endless internal repetition, their quality of never being possible to comprehend. Like vast shoals of herring or the myriads of moths, nature has been unable to control its fecundity and has reached only a dead end.

The narrator is both attracted and repelled by such structures. He develops feelings of disgust and nausea when he visits the Antwerp forts, which have been used as torture chambers, but is compelled to wander ever deeper inside, searching for something that will shock him, and even to return later for a second dose. He repeatedly visits structures that disturb him emotionally, such as the slave labour camp, Theresienstadt, hoping that the place will speak to him, even if the signs of the events have long disappeared.

Railway stations and rail travel also have a particular significance to Sebald. The rail traveller can be on his own, lost in his own thoughts, but still moving with a crowd of people. Sometimes the railway systems are themselves geographically misplaced, like the rail line in East Anglia that was intended for the Chinese emperor but remained in England – the engines still carry Chinese markings. Confusion in space is linked to confusion in time. The coming of the railways introduced a unitary time system to Europe and then to the world, because of the need to co-ordinate arrival and departure times. Greenwich time, previously only an abstract idea, took on a dominant role in everyday life. Railways are the destroyer of any notion of localized free-moving time. Railway stations become places with their own hard to

understand codes of behaviour, mythical zones. Stations in Sebald's work are often dark and mournful, spatially vague, 'an entrance to the underworld', places for lost things, and lost people, like the children of the Kindertransport, waiting in the vastness of Liverpool Street station to have a new life assigned to them. Railways have an even darker side, they are also the means for transporting the German Jewish population to the labour and death camps, part of the industrial system of extermination. And the small charming railway line running through the landscape in southern Germany is the suicide point for Paul Beyerer, one of the Jewish exiles in *The Emigrants*: 'Railways had always meant a great deal to him, perhaps he felt they were headed for death. Timetables and directories, all the logistics of railways, had at times become an obsession for him, as his flat in S showed. I can see the Märklin model railway he had laid out on a deal table in the spare north-facing room; it is to me the very image and symbol of Paul's German tragedy.'

switzerland. sunny and clear. a complex of buildings beside a lake in the mountains. a wooden stair. a long bare room with wooden boards. a table and chair, both finely constructed. some dried flowers laid out on the table. a man sitting at the table, scribbling onto sheets of paper, scratching his head, scrumpling up the sheets and throwing them out the window.

Many of the characters in Sebald's books are writers faced with the impossibility of writing. He notes in *The Rings of Saturn*, 'For days and weeks on end one racks one's brains to no avail, and if asked could not say whether one goes on writing purely out of habit, or a craving for admiration, or because one knows not how to do anything other, or out of sheer wonderment, despair or outrage, any more than one could say

whether writing renders one more perceptive or insane'. In *Austerlitz* several pages are spent writing elegantly and convincingly on the impossibility of writing, 'the whole structure of language, the syntactic ordering of the individual elements, the punctuation, the conjunctions, and lastly even the names for everyday things, everything was concealed in an impenetrable fog. And what I myself have written in the past, yes particularly this, I understood no more.' The impossible and sedentary occupation of writing is replaced by movement, by the freedom of walking. Austerlitz wanders the streets of London, criss-crossing the vast city, not looking for anything, not trying to record anything, just moving forward. In *The Emigrants* the narrator wanders through Manchester. The whole of *The Rings of Saturn* is one extended walk. *Vertigo* ends with a walk down the Alps to Wettach.

The Swiss alpine landscape, with its sense of scale, its geological time-span, its lakes, its quietness, as the only landscape of the German-speaking peoples not to have been occupied by the Nazis, appears several times in Sebald's writing as a kind of ideal. It is a



place where there is still hope because the land is still as it always was, in contrast to both the flat desolation of East Anglia and the over-clean German landscape. In *Logis in einem Landhaus* Sebald describes the struggles of two Swiss writers, the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the prose author Robert Walser, who, instead of writing, resort to walking. Each seems like a prototype for the personality of the

Rousseau, of Genevan origin, in exile from France, paces the floorboards in a house on the St Peterinsel on the Bielersee, wearing them away, walking as a means of getting the thoughts out of his head, because 'one can also understand writing as an ever-continuing compulsive act, which reveals the writer, of all who think about unhealthy subjects, to be the most incurable'. On his visit to this room

where I am aware of nothing at all: the more I think of my present situation the less I can understand where I am'. Walking, Rousseau slows down, escapes from thinking, and enters into a trance-like state, free from worry. Faced with the difficulties of writing, Rousseau, like Sebald, finds consolation in natural history: 'not wishing to work any longer... I undertook to produce a *Flora Petroinsularis*, and to describe all the plants of the island without omitting a single one.'

Robert Walser was born in and, for many years, was an inhabitant of the city of Biel, one of the few cities in Switzerland where both German and French are spoken. Walser reminds Sebald of his own grandfather, who had looked after him as a child. He finds similarities in their antiquated style of dress and their love of walking in the mountains. Walser becomes a kind of adopted ancestor for Sebald, and a precedent for the life of the writer and walker. In *Die Spaziergang*, Walser describes leaving a blank sheet of paper in his studio and setting off to walk: 'secretly and furtively beautiful elegant walking-thoughts slip within the walker, so that in the middle of his worthy and attentive walking, he must halt and listen, and so that he is repeatedly dazed and overwhelmed by remarkable impressions and by the captivating spirit world [*Geistergewalt*].' Sebald writes 'the traces, which Robert Walser left behind on his path through life, were so light that they were almost blown away'.

Some of Walser's prose pieces are so light they hardly seem to hold together at all, just a description of snow, or a few fragments of a conversation, a strange feeling of happiness. His writing becomes increasingly furtive, he writes as though indulging in a guilty activity, on concealed pieces of paper. 'My back becomes crooked, reported the writer... since I often sit for hours over one word, which must follow the long path from the brain to the hand.' Walser's

narrator, alpine writers in exile, escaping into the landscape. Both relate to the curious and fragmented zone in Switzerland where the French and German languages cross over, where there is no clear boundary between the two, but an intermingling of villages and towns speaking one language or the other, in particular along the Bielersee (Lac Bienne).

Sebald recounts how Jean-Jacques

Sebald writes, 'As I was in the Rousseau room it was as though I was taken back into the past, an illusion that I could allow myself more easily, since on the island itself there was not even the most distant sound of an engine, a stillness reigned as overall in the world two or three hundred years ago'. In *Rêveries d'un Promeneur Solitaire*, Rousseau records his emotional state: 'I see myself thrown into an incomprehensible chaos



handwriting reached the point of physical disappearance, a minute, almost indecipherable script, in pencil, one millimetre high, in code, on scraps of wastepaper, pieces of prose with figures that appear and vanish, 'from one piece of prose to another, always the same novel, which one could describe as a multifold cut up or disconnected Ich-book'. For the last decades of his life Walser abandoned writing altogether for walking in the hills.

Sebald's narrator is often at the point of abandoning writing, perhaps even – like various of Sebald's characters – of gently vanishing. Yet as he writes increasingly and elegantly about the impossibility of writing, Sebald's own production becomes more complex, and his books longer. Early works such as *Nach der Natur* have comparatively short and simple constructions; by the time of *Austerlitz* the book has become one single piece of prose, almost without pause, sentences extended into long elegant constructions, phrase built upon phrase, their very length allowing anything to be included and connected. Only the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard, another mountain walker – 'we cannot say we think, in the way we walk, just as we cannot say we walk, in the way we think, because we cannot walk in the way we think, cannot think in the way we walk' – can compare with Sebald for creating sentences the length of a book. But while Bernhard's sentences snarl and spiral viciously around themselves, Sebald's just flow on, spread out, absorbing contradictions and changes of direction. His remark on Thomas Browne applies as much to himself: that he produced 'labyrinthine sentences that sometimes extend over one or two pages, sentences that resemble processions or a funeral cortège in their sheer ceremonial lavishness'.

**bohemia. mist. a former fortress from the eighteenth century with a vast and complicated defence system of angled**

buttresses. buildings within the fortifications laid out in a grid. most buildings constructed of brick covered in stucco. an air of dereliction, the paths muddy, the walls beginning to crumble, the doors hanging loose. some tourists with video cameras. a man with an ancient camera taking pictures of doorways.

Sebald's books are illustrated, or rather accompanied by photographs set into the text. These are small, rather grainy, even slightly out of focus and deliberately artless. Some appear rather arbitrarily cropped, showing objects, details of paintings, portraits, bits of landscapes. Some have the feeling of French surrealist books of the 1920s – *Nadja* or *Paris Peasant* – in which the image unsettles the text. Sebald's images, however, are not surreal; they appear rather ordinary, like private snapshots. Sebald deploys them to create a disturbing atmosphere, distinct from the melancholy of the text. The photographs, together with fragments of drawings and calligraphy, seem sometimes to be images of some other world, a sort of spirit world, like ours but located elsewhere, or perhaps already vanished.

Photographs have a different quality from the written word that merely describes without providing evidence. At first it seems that Sebald is using these images as a kind of evidence, to show that he had really been in a particular place, that the books are a type of documentary in which word and photographs combine to state some truth. Sometimes also they seem like a replacement for a faulty memory; if the narrator in his emotional state can't quite remember then at least the photo will suffer no such malfunction. Yet photos must be taken by somebody, and a fictional person such as Austerlitz or a semi-fictional person such as the narrator can hardly take real photographs. The presence of these photo-



graphs begins to have another quality.

The original title, in German, of the book published in English as *Vertigo*, is *Schwindel.Gefühle*, literally 'Dizziness. Feelings'. *Schwindel* means not only dizziness but also swindle, or lie, implying that the book is a kind of lie, or perhaps that feelings lie, or even that feelings are the opposite of lies. Some of the photographs are part of a fiction, they are evidence of events that may never have happened. The books are careful assemblies of things that may be true and things that may be invented. In an interview with the French newspaper *Liberation*, Sebald comments on Roland Barthes' book *La Chambre claire*, and describes how Barthes looks at a photograph of a schoolchild by Kertész and asks 'is it possible that Ernest is still living today: but where? how? What a novel!' Sebald is writing just such a novel.

This produces a disturbing effect, sometimes Sebald is describing real people, sometimes they are fictions, sometimes they are a mix of the two. *The Emigrants* reads like the biographies of four real lives, but, while three are basically true stories, the last life, of the Manchester painter Max Ferber, is a

composite story – two found lives sewn together as one. Some of the diaries transcribed in the book are genuine, some written by Sebald. In the case of such descriptions – of the lives of Jewish exiles – there is a feeling of unease, for so much of the history of what occurred is based on a notion of truth that has been attacked by those that deny the facts of the Holocaust. As Sebald begins to play with the ideas of documentary and recording, he also begins to call into question the accepted truth of this history.

*The Emigrants* ends with a description of a photograph, not shown in the book, of three women in the Lodz ghetto. ‘Who the three young women are I do not know. The light falls on them from the window in the background, so I cannot make out their eyes clearly, but I sense all three of them are looking across at me, since I am standing on the very spot where Genewein the accountant stood with his camera.’ The photograph exists only as this description in the text, the usual condition has been reversed, image has been replaced by words. Through the photograph the narrator, unstable as ever, almost imagines himself back into the semi-dark-

ness of the ghetto, at a time when the women were still alive, as though his eyes could replace the camera.

*eastern france. bright summer's day. a courtyard leading to a large room in an old church. many paintings on wooden stands. a painting with many opening timber panels, which fold together in a complex fashion. on the right hand panel the figure of a man, dressed in a vermilion cloth, standing vertically but floating above the ground. behind him the night sky with a circle of luminous orange, at the edge an unusual green. the paintwork of the face rather thin, as though the orange is shining through the face, something else is about to be revealed. some children kicking each other. a man sitting on a bench, writing a postcard.*

In *Nach der Natur*, Sebald describes how x-rays of the German painter Grünewald's works reveal that sometimes he painted one head over another, and that in some cases the lowest of these heads is a self-portrait of the painter himself. Each portrait has a multiple identity, all reflected in that of the painter. Grünewald is a typical Sebald type, an uncertain personality, going by various names – Mathis Nithardt, Martys Gotthart, Martys Grün – each of whom may also refer to a separate person. Similarly, many of Sebald's characters appear to be variations of one person, or one type, repeatedly refracted and recomposed, tested out in different locations and different times. His books are filled with encounters with people who resemble the dead, he sees Dante in the street, Ludwig II of Bavaria in a gondola, a child who looks like Kafka.

Do Sebald's descriptions of places operate like Grünewald's faces, as sequences that lie one over the other, reaching always backwards? The rooms are in different locations and take different forms, but they work almost as a series, based on one type repeatedly

redescribed. Rooms that are both disused and cluttered occur over and again, filled with devices for recording time or shards of natural history, or perhaps simply full of objects representing a discarded past.

These spaces are also haunted by a curious feeling of *déjà-vu*, as, for example, when Sebald describes a visit to the spa at Marienbad and recalls a feeling of unease, explained later by the memory of an earlier, forgotten visit. When he visits the room of the German writer Michael Hamburger, he has the sensation that it is his own room, that he has lived there before, and that, consequently, the possessions are his.

In Sebald's books ordinary houses become labyrinthine, their spaces impossible to understand as a whole. It is as though parts have become dislocated, or as though there is no exterior. He describes the flat, part of an old house in the countryside, in which he once lived: ‘one entered a dark stairwell; and on every floor hidden passageways branched off, running behind walls in such a way that the servants... never had to cross the lives of their betters. Often I tried to imagine what went on inside the heads of the people who led their lives knowing that, behind the walls of the rooms they were in, the shadows of the servants were perpetually flitting past.’

Might there also be some final room to this long sequence, a point of origin, some version of Grünewald's last head? In the last section of *Vertigo* he returns to the family home in Bavaria and goes upstairs to an attic, packed full of abandoned objects from the preceding centuries, boxes, books, a figure wearing a dusty uniform from the Napoleonic wars, old nests, chests, ‘it was easy to imagine that this entire assemblage of the most diverse objects had been moving in some sort of secret evolution, until the moment we entered, and that it was only because of our presence that these things now held



their breath as if nothing had happened'. The reader begins to feel that if he looked long enough in this attic he might find the origin of many of the elements of the other rooms in Sebald's books, these elements now following their own secret evolutionary paths.

norfolk. maybe like this. probably raining. a pleasant house in the countryside, possibly a former vicarage. flowers and some vegetables laid out in the garden. on the ground floor a very english room, pictures on the wall, fire lit. the walls of the room piled high with books and papers, some stuffed into the shelves to overflowing. a man standing, looking out of the window, at first appearing rather distressed and then, now finally, humming contentedly to himself.

Enough darkness. Enough fiction. Perhaps everything is so much simpler. Consider again those traces so light they were almost blown away.

In the prose poem *Die Dunkle Nacht Fahrt Aus*, the last of the trilogy of *Nach der Natur*, written at the beginning of Sebald's career as a fiction writer, the narrator sees his house in East Anglia, not far from the original, prehistoric, mouth of the river Rhine. He 'slides without a noise, high over the earth' back along the Rhine, over the deserted industrial zones, past the modern towers of Frankfurt am Main, 'time slowing and speeding up', over the Odenwald to his old school-building where his teacher is explaining a painting by Altdorfer. It depicts a vast battle, in which Alexander the Great saves the western world from destruction by the eastern hordes. The journey enters the painting, passes over the battle to the landscape behind, moves south, over the Mediterranean and Egypt to the Nile delta and 'further in the distance, towering in the fading light, the snow and ice mountains of the strange unexplored and African continent'.

Are there ice-mountains in Africa? At



least for the painter Altdorfer and the flexible geography of the renaissance world. And perhaps also for the narrator, and even for his shadowy twin W. G. Sebald. The Alps, the ideal landscape, moved south. White where one expects dark. Inhabited, imagined and pictorial time as one. The narrator escapes for a few moments from his melancholic present. Moves outwards and upwards and vanishes into the unknown.

Works by W. G. Sebald mentioned in this article include:

*Nach der Natur* (Greno Verlagsgesellschaft, 1988). To be translated as *After Nature* (London, 2002)

*Schwindel. Gefühle* (Eichborn Verlag, 1990). Translated as *Vertigo* (London, 1999)  
*Die Ausgewanderten* (Eichborn Verlag, 1992). Translated as *The Emigrants* (London, 1996)

*Die Ringe des Saturn* (Eichborn Verlag 1995). Translated as *The Rings of Saturn* (London, 1998)

*Logis in einem Landhaus* (Carl Hanser Verlag, 1998)

*Luftkrieg und Literatur* (Carl Hanser Verlag, 1999)

*Austerlitz* (Carl Hanser Verlag, 2001). Translated as *Austerlitz* (London, 2001)

Extracts translated by the author except for texts available (September 2001) in English. Thanks to John H for comments and suggestions.

# Contributors



GEORGES PEREC ON RUE VILIN © PIERRE GETZLER

**Paul Auster** is a writer. His critically acclaimed works include *The New York Trilogy*, *Moon Palace*, *The Music of Chance*, *Leviathan*, *Mr Vertigo* and *Timbuktu*, as well as the screenplays *Smoke*, *Blue in the Face* and *Lulu on the Bridge*. He has published several volumes of essays, poems and translations, and memoirs, and edited *The Random House Book of Twentieth-Century French Poetry*. The text in this volume is drawn from *The Art of Hunger*, a collection of essays, prefaces and interviews that vividly reflects the range and incisiveness of Auster's writing. More recently Auster edited *True Tales of American Life*, a collection of 'true stories that sounded like fiction'.

**Marcel Bénabou** was born in Morocco and left for Paris in the 1960s, where he became a professor of ancient history at the University of Paris VII Jussieu and the 'Definitely Provisional Secretary' of the OuLiPo. Drawing influences from an Arabic background, Jewish heritage and French acculturation, his books are a playful paradox on confessional literature and creative endeavor. Works include *Why I Have Not Written Any of My Books and Dump This Book While You Still Can!*

**Jean-Charles Depaule** was born in 1945 in Toulon and taught at the Architectural School of Versailles for 15 years. He is a researcher in social science at the National Centre for Scientific Research CNRS – Laboratory of Urban Anthropology, Paris) and studies daily life and inhabited space, in particular in the towns of the Arabian Orient (he lived in Cairo for six years). Currently he is co-ordinating a programme of international research into the designation of the town and its territories in different linguistic zones. Also a poet, he is the author of two collections and regularly publishes poems, translations and reviews in magazines and anthologies.

**Tom Emerson** teaches at the AA and is a partner at 6a architects, which has just completed a series of stores for the on-line fashion retailer oki-ni. Current projects include a new-build house in south London, a gallery and performance space, and several products for the ironmongery and lighting manufacturer Ize.

**William Firebrace** is professor for design at the Academy for Fine Arts in Stuttgart. He is the author of *Things Worth Seeing* and of the recently published e-book *Specious Spacious* on Georges Perec. [www.proboscis.org.uk](http://www.proboscis.org.uk)

**Pierre Getzler** is a painter. He has also been a bibliographer and worked with Jacques Roubaud on an inventory of the French sonnet from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. As a painter he has collaborated with the poets Alain Lance, Paul Louis Rossi, Jacques Roubaud, Jacques Jouet and with the review *Action poétique*. He first met Georges Perec in 1957 and they both participated in a small group of intellectuals called 'La Ligne Générale' (from the French title of a film by S.M. Eisenstein). As a photographer he has taken photographs of and for Perec, of rue Vilin in particular. He drew the frontispiece for Perec's *La Clôture*, a book of poems published in 1980. He has also written 'D'un embarras d'espaces' published in *Portrait(s) de Georges Perec* (ed. Paulette Perec).

**Julian Green** was born in 1900 to American parents living in Paris. A prolific and award-winning writer, Green was the first foreign member of the Académie Française – an elite panel, founded in 1635 to safeguard the French language. Green published over 70 books in France, ranging from novels, essays and plays, to a multi-volume journal. Many of his works including *Leviathan* (*The Dark Journey*), *Moira* and *South*, are characterized by a dark mixture of murder and madness, sex and suicide. He died in 1998.

**Jacques Jouet** was born in Viry-Châtillon near Paris and is a member of the OuLiPo. A prolific poet, playwright, and novelist, his published works include the complete collection of *Metro Poems* (a stunning work of which the extracts in this volume are but a small taste), *La scène usurpée*, *La république romaine*, and *La République des Mek-Ouyes*.

**Georges Perec** was born in Paris, in 1936, of Polish-Jewish parents. He lost his father in 1940 and his mother – murdered in Auschwitz – in 1943. He survived the war in the so-called 'Zone Libre' and, after the Liberation, returned to live in Paris with an aunt and uncle. His life, to a degree that is unusual even among artists, is practically inseparable from his writing. His literary output is exceptionally varied, ranging over virtually every recognized genre – and a few that are not... He is remembered as a virtuoso of linguistic manipulation, being, from 1966, a member of the experimental group, the OuLiPo (Workshop of Potential Literature) which has numbered amongst its members writers such as Raymond Queneau, Harry Mathews and Italo Calvino. Notable works include *A Void* (a 'lipogrammatic' novel that entirely dispenses with the services of the letter E), *W or the Memory of Childhood* (an autobiography of his early years that revitalized and revolutionized the practice of 'life-writing' in France) and his masterpiece *Life A User's Manual* (a 99-chapter novel written in accordance to an arcane underlying system of mathematical constraints). The texts in this volume bear witness to the sociological strain in his writing and his desire to 'interrogate the everyday', to articulate that which is so banal, so familiar, as to escape our normal attention. He died in Paris in 1982.

**Andrew Leak** is senior lecturer in French at University College London. He is one of Georges Perec's English translators and has written numerous articles on Perec. He is currently writing a book entitled *Writing Spaces: the Work of Georges Perec*. He has previously published books on Jean-Paul Sartre and Roland Barthes.

**Jean Baptiste Marot** is a painter. His paintings for Eric Rohmer's film *The Lady and the Duke* were exhibited at the AA during the Spring of 2002, when he also gave a lecture. He is currently producing a series of paintings, titled *Informal*.

**Harry Mathews** is a writer and member of the Oulipo. He studied music and musicology at Harvard and the Ecole Normale de Musique in Paris. Along with John Ashberry, Kenneth Koch and James Schuyler, he edited and published the review *Locus Solus* (1960–2). He has translated works by Marie Chaix, Jeanne Cordelier, Georges Bataille and Georges Perec. Among his works are *Tlooth*, a novel that begins in a Russian prison camp at a baseball game and ends in France with a print of *Sfax; Singular Pleasures*, 61 short fictions on the subject of masturbation; and *The Orchard*, a moving and beautiful record of his friendship with Georges Perec.

**Ian Monk** was born in 1960 near London. After studying Classics at Bristol University, he moved to France where he now lives as a writer (primarily of poetry and short fiction) and translator (of, among others, Georges Perec, Daniel Pennac, and Raymond Roussel). He has been a member of the Oulipo since 1998, after making important contributions to the *Oulipo Compendium*, and has recently issued a translation of the group's collective novel, *Winter Journeys*.

**Jason Oddy** is a photographer and writer. A regular contributor to *The Independent*, and a number of other publications, his photographic work often reflects a strong interest in architecture. His work has been widely exhibited on both sides of the Atlantic including (on this side) at the AA. *The Decline of the Soviet Sanatorium* was published in AA Files 41.

**Luke Oxley** is an artist and curator. Since graduating from Goldsmiths in 2000 he has worked as a creative consultant for brands such as Levi Strauss and Coca Cola, where he explores a cross disciplinary approach to the production and contextual placement of art as a commodity fetish. He has most recently completed large-scale commissions for The Economist, Habitat, Selfridges and Mandarina Duck. *Highly Desirable, Extremely Affordable* (2001) was commissioned for Habitat Tottenham Court Road, while *So Good Looking* (2001) was commissioned as part of the Bowieart Window Pain Project. Oxley is currently preparing for forthcoming exhibitions in London, France, Germany and Korea.

**Cristobal Palma** grew up in Santiago, Chile. Since the beginning of 2001 he has been working as a freelance photographer based in London.

**Jacques Roubaud** is a mathematician, poet, novelist and a member of the Oulipo. His literary work, which has been described as 'an exemplary demonstration of the creative potential of form and of the interpenetration of mathematics and literature', includes  $\in$  (1967) a poem sequence structured according to the rules of the Japanese board-game go, which he helped introduce into France (writing, with Georges Perec and Pierre Lusson, *Petit Traité invitant à l'art subtil du go*). Roubaud is best known for his work of poetry, *Something Black*, a moving lamentation on the death of his second wife, the comic *Hortense* trilogy and *Great Fire of London*, a brilliant account of a great work he can never write.

**Terry Smith** began making art work when he was 16 and has no intention of stopping until he runs out of breath. He has made installations, exhibitions and projects all over the world including Leytonstone. He makes work out of anything he finds and has no particular preference for one medium over another. He has only ever had one idea, but can't remember what it was, but he is happy to borrow or steal, if necessary, any ideas worth taking. Anyway he does not think that good ideas make good art. Art is made another way; he does not know what that way is, so he keeps making art hoping one day he will learn something worth repeating.

**Carlos Villanueva Brandt** is an architect. Having studied at the AA, he is now a unit master in the Diploma School. A founder member of NATO, he went on to form his own practice which has designed architectural projects of various sizes in locations ranging from London to Kazakhstan, and has built projects in London, Greece and Japan. The work has been published widely and exhibited internationally.  
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**Paul Virilio** is an urban planner, philosopher, and professor at the Ecole spéciale d'architecture in Paris. Laureate of the Grand Prix national de la critique architecturale in 1987, he has written several books including *Bunker Archaeology*, *L'Espace critique* and, with Claude Parent, the AA Publication *Function of the Oblique. A Landscape of Events* is the most recent of his works to be translated into English.

**Enrique Walker** is an architect. He graduated from the AA in 1995 and is currently completing a PhD on the work of Georges Perec. He has published a series of interviews with architects since the mid-nineties, some of which were collected in the book *12 Entrevistas*, of which he is co-author. At present he teaches at the University of Chile.

**Richard Wentworth** is an artist. Born in Samoa in 1947, he lives and works in London.

**Charlotte Coudrille** who did so much to ensure that this magazine maintained the highest of standards passed away in November 2001. We will struggle to maintain them without her.

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Girls coming  
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